

Tristan Corbière's *Amours jaunes* in Allen Ginsberg's Early Poetry

Véronique Lane

It was barely French. The author was talking pidgin, writing his poems as if they were telegrams, suppressing too many verbs, affecting a mocking tone, indulging in the jibes of a low bagman; then, all at once, out of this jumble would squirm curious conceits, dubious affectations, and suddenly a cry of acute pain would start, like a violincello string's breaking.

J. K. Huysmans, *À rebours* (1884)

IN SPRING 1955, Allen Ginsberg would have read the above account of Tristan Corbière's *Amours jaunes* (*Yellow Loves*, 1873)¹ in the introduction to the bilingual edition he had just acquired.² Was Ginsberg planning to produce the same type of effects, from “talking pidgin” to “a cry of acute pain,” in the poem he was then on the verge of writing? To what extent did Corbière's example inspire or enable him that summer to compose “Howl”? Such questions are in need of a context because the names of Ginsberg and Corbière have hardly ever been brought together, for two broad reasons. One is that, across all his poems, essays, letters, and journals, Ginsberg made barely half a dozen references to Corbière, which might suggest his genealogical importance was limited, since the American poet was not shy about

promoting his literary affiliations. The other reason is that the largely Anglophone, American-centric expertise of Ginsberg scholarship has rarely critiqued the nationalistic reception of “Howl” as a poem of its place as well as its time: it remains “the poem that changed America.”³ What follows is an attempt to discover the significance of Ginsberg’s creative use of Corbière, not only in 1955 but over a forty-year period: from 1947 when he first notes reading Corbière’s poetry, to 1958 when his writing of “The Lion for Real” is informed by Corbière’s “Rapsodie du sourd” (“Deaf Man’s Rhapsody”), and to 1986 when, in the variorum edition of “Howl,” Ginsberg first reveals the otherwise hermetic presence in his poem of Corbière’s “Cris d’aveugle” (“Cries of the Blind-man”).⁴

The unshakable image of Ginsberg as an exhibitionist national poet-prophet, brazenly exposing himself while loudly identifying with Walt Whitman, has made it all too easy to miss the hermeneutical subtlety beneath the self-promotion. In the case of “Howl,” that sensationalist image has tended to be reinforced by the standard biographical narrative of the poem’s background. Although James Breslin has refuted “the myth of the Breakthrough,”⁵ the writing of “Howl” in 1955 remains tied to Ginsberg quitting his job in market research in San Francisco and going through the traumatic but liberating experience of psychoanalysis and accepting his homosexuality. The emphasis in this account of his poem’s genesis is on releasing the “acute cry of pain,” to recall Huysmans. Listening to the emotionally charged sound effects of “Howl” in any of the several recordings Ginsberg made amounts to a crucial level of engagement, and its oral performativity is one of its connections to Corbière’s poetry. But the poem also addresses readers on a cryptic level that requires reading between the lines, and it is this aesthetic of indirection that is tied directly to the French modernist poetry he most admired. It is therefore no coincidence that in the variorum edition of “Howl” Ginsberg

annotated his poem to reveal Corbière's presence, but did so in such a way that his annotation itself needs to be read for what it oddly leaves unsaid.

Three years after writing "Howl," Ginsberg would also write a series of poems – most memorably "At Apollinaire's Grave" and "Death to Van Gogh's Ear!" – that inscribed his work into a literary lineage by working on two levels of reference. The explicit strategy of naming written into their very titles, alluding directly to Guillaume Apollinaire and indirectly to Antonin Artaud's essay *Van Gogh le suicidé de la société*, is visibly extended through catalogs of a dozen literary names in each poem. But these overt and seemingly superficial acts of homage go together with a hermetic level of reference that reaches its apogee in a third poem from this period, "The Lion for Real," which cites Corbière's "Rapsodie du sourd" without identifying it. From "Howl" in 1955, to "The Lion for Real" in 1958, and to annotations in the variorum edition of "Howl" in 1986, Ginsberg thus consistently inscribed Corbière's work in his own, but in ways that concealed as much as they revealed. In short, behind the visible acts of homage, from poet to poet, there lies a secret hermeneutic strategy between poem and reader.⁶ The aim of this article, then, is to decipher the highly charged ambivalence of Ginsberg's allusive strategy as providing the basis for a comparative reading that shows the extent to which the French poet's aesthetics shaped the American's at the turning point of his *œuvre*.

Ginsberg in 'rehab': reading Corbière

Ever since Paul Verlaine included Corbière as the first of the five 'maudits' discussed in his infamous *Poètes maudits* (1884), he has been seen as the archetype of the modern trope. By his own account physically unattractive, living under the threat of a diagnosis for an early

death, and at odds with his contemporaries, Corbière authored a single collection of poems in his lifetime, *Les amours jaunes*. Originally from Brittany, he stayed in Paris but kept his distance from the poets of the dominant literary movement of his time, the Parnasse. Together with the irony that characterized his style, his self-imposed isolation contributed to make Corbière the ‘poète maudit’ par excellence, albeit overshadowed in the twentieth century by the rise of Rimbaud.

Ginsberg first mentions reading Corbière in 1947, the very year Walter McElroy’s translation was published, a sign in itself of his attraction to his work.⁷ At that time, Corbière was still relatively little known in France, but was beginning to be read in America thanks to his eminent champions, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.⁸ Amongst the four poems Eliot wrote in French, which Pound oversaw, one was in fact entitled “Tristan Corbière.”⁹ Pound and Eliot were so effective in their roles as *passseurs* that Corbière paradoxically remains as well as, if not more widely, known to Anglo-American readers than to French ones. In all probability, the attention of Ginsberg, like that of his contemporaries, was therefore brought to Corbière by the praises of one or both high modernists. Once in his hands though, Ginsberg was bound to be seduced by Corbière’s œuvre on its own terms, initially perhaps for striking biographical coincidences but also, and most importantly I will argue here, for stylistic reasons.

Ginsberg’s second mention of Corbière confirms the level of his interest, attesting to his having acquired not one but two different bilingual editions of his poems. In a reading list dated April-May 1955, his journals record C. F. MacIntyre’s translation of *Les amours jaunes*, which, like McElroy’s translation in 1947, had again only just been released.¹⁰ More important still is the appearance Corbière makes in May 1955 in a letter to Jack Kerouac. Here Ginsberg proudly presents himself as the new owner of the “extra big desk” that would

be made famous by the photograph taken of him at work on “Howl”: “I have now extra big desk reading Corbière and Buddha and Pound, slowly rehabilitating my heart to write.”¹¹

Named first in this list, Corbière is by implication most closely identified with the process of creative rehabilitation. The therapeutic qualities of his wry, frenzied poetry are dubious, however, and would surely pale in comparison to that of Buddha. The proximity of Corbière’s name next to Pound’s is more significant, for it implies that Ginsberg’s interest in the French ‘poète maudit’ was aesthetic, and corroborates the genealogical trajectory hinted at above, that Ginsberg’s Corbière came from Pound. The listing of Corbière *before* Pound also suggests that the champion was here supplanted by the poet championed.

Why and how exactly Corbière contributed to Ginsberg’s creative breakthrough in spring 1955 is not immediately clear. Ginsberg, who was just turning twenty-nine, knew that Corbière did not live to see thirty, the kind of biographical point of intersection that would have stimulated him. But a more material case for his identification with the French poet can be made based on the edition of *Les amours jaunes* he was then discovering. MacIntyre’s introduction of “the strangest and most exciting poet of late nineteenth-century France” indeed argues for three factors having “to be held accountable for the oddities and nuances manifested everywhere in his life and his work” that were bound to prompt Ginsberg to identify with Corbière from page 1 of the edition: “his father was a remarkable man, the boy had ill health [...] and he was a genius” (MacIntyre 1). Not every poet’s father is also a known poet, so the fact that Tristan Corbière’s father – like Ginsberg’s – was a writer, would have struck him. MacIntyre’s “Introduction” to *Les amours jaunes* also noted that Édouard Corbière wrote a novel entitled *Le négrier*, which Rémy de Gourmont read and commented on in terms that could only resonate with Ginsberg’s preoccupations at the time: “The same

spirit, with talent and a sharpened nervous system, and you have Tristan” (1). There is no doubt that comment would have mirrored back to Ginsberg a sense of his own destiny, a vision of his own tortured struggle to fulfil his grand literary ambitions and overcome not only a febrile nervous system but also the identity crisis for which he was then undergoing psychoanalysis. When Ginsberg speaks of reading Corbière as a way of “rehabilitating his heart to write,” we have to wonder why, if it worked, there is no sign of him in “Howl.” In the first draft of Part I, Ginsberg had named Buddha and no fewer than eleven of his most revered writers, including five French: Artaud, Céline, Genet, Proust, and Rimbaud. Even though he later changed his mind and redacted them, leaving only two Anglophone poets in “Howl” (Blake and Poe), Ginsberg initially saluted those writers by inscribing their names in his text, but not Corbière. The obvious conclusion is that Corbière was just one of too many sources to mention, but this idea is contradicted by the way that, three decades later, in the variorum edition of “Howl,” Ginsberg chose to reveal Corbière’s presence in the poem and hint that he was in fact behind the very title he gave it.

From Corbière’s “Cris” to Ginsberg’s “Howl”

A cynic might view the variorum edition of “Howl” published in 1986 as evidence that Ginsberg never really gave up his career in marketing, and in a sense it is an exercise in shameless self-promotion. To see it as an unvarnished advertisement for himself and his poetics, however, would be to miss the deep hesitation that runs through the poem. For the variorum edition reveals how acutely aware Ginsberg was of the paradox that, by spelling out the literary references readers had missed in his poem, he risked undermining his own poetics. Annotating “Howl” in 1986, he confronted exactly the same ambivalence he had experienced

writing it in 1955, when he first paid homage to a catalog of writers and then redacted all their names: was it better to be explicit or cryptic? While the variorum edition elucidates many sources in a straightforward manner, it also employs at times quite slippery tactics of indirection that seem designed to pay respect to the subtle poetics of “Howl” by hinting rather than revealing. In this context, the annotation in which Corbière appears is fittingly the subtlest of all.

Corbière’s otherwise invisible presence in “Howl” is brought to the reader’s attention by the gloss Ginsberg offers of two phrases from a line near the very end of Part I of the poem: “Goldhorn shadow” and “Lamma lamma sabachthani” (Ginsberg, *Howl* 134). The first phrase is actually, if vaguely, identified as having another source (it “paraphrases some sentence by Kerouac”), while the second is attributed with precision and at great length:

“Lamma lamma sabachthani” – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Christ’s last words from the cross (“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani”: Matthew 27: 46) – of final draft was lifted from Tristan Corbière’s version in “Cris d’aveugle” (“Cries of the Blind-man”) in *Poems*, trans. Walter McElroy (Pawlet, Vt.: Banyan Press, 1947), p. 30 (Ginsberg, *Howl* 134).

This long entry is then followed by two full stanzas of Corbière’s poem running in parallel columns in both English and French. Why Ginsberg goes into so much bibliographical detail and makes such a long entry, including this unique bilingual quotation, is far from clear. If it has to do with the location of the line in “Howl” – the end of Part I is where he sets out explicitly the aesthetic ambitions of his poem, “to recreate the syntax and measure of poor

human prose” – he doesn’t say so (6). Likewise, while it is logical, if still oddly indulgent, for Ginsberg to reproduce the stanza of “Cris d’aveugle” that includes the line “Lamma lamma sabacthani,” he offers no explanation at all for quoting a second stanza, other than the three words that introduce it: “The poem ends:” (135). If the extent and structure of the annotation are baffling, so too is its purpose. Why does Ginsberg go to such lengths to acknowledge Corbière? We might even wonder why the acknowledgement is needed at all, why Ginsberg felt the need to mention “Cris d’aveugle” in the first place when glossing the last words of Christ. In the West, doesn’t the Bible, with Shakespeare, belong to every poet; since when are Christ’s last words the property of Corbière? There is in fact a case for suggesting that he did not take them from Corbière, since “Howl” cites *more* of Christ’s words than appear in “Cris d’aveugle,” retaining the name of God missing from Corbière’s poem: “eli eli.” Yet Ginsberg does not just insist on attributing the words to Corbière, he confesses having “lifted” them from his poem; ‘lifting’ egregiously identifying him with pickpockets and plagiarists. Why should he criminalize himself?

We might speculate that Corbière is there to mediate Ginsberg’s borrowing from the Bible, that his presence ironizes an otherwise self-aggrandizing identification with the son of God in his last moments on the cross. The effect would be similar to the crucial revision Ginsberg made in the very opening line of “Howl,” when replacing “mystical” with “hysterical”: as his annotation in the variorum edition observes, that revision was a way to use “humorous hyperbole” to counterbalance “idealistic impulse” and so arrive at a tone that was a “mixture of empathy and shrewdness” (124). Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that the line in “Howl” giving rise to the Corbière annotation was itself a late revision, the last words of Christ appearing as an autograph addition on draft 3 of the poem, inserted immediately before

the phrase “saxophone cry” (31). Putting Christ’s dying lament together with jazz music, Ginsberg in effect achieved the same tonal “mixture” as that intended by the revision of “mystical” to “hysterical,” and in so doing approximated the ironies in Corbière’s own use of Christ’s last words. If the phrase “saxophone cry” inspired him to borrow from “Cries of the Blind-man,” the link to Corbière would seem to be made on the basis of both a particular vocabulary (“cry” and “cries”) and a particular attention to sound and musicality. In this context, we can better understand not only why, in his annotation, Ginsberg gives the full details of McElroy’s edition of *Les amours jaunes*, but why he uses it in the first place (after all, we know that in May 1955, as he prepared to write “Howl,” he had acquired McIntyre’s recently published edition). Comparing the two, it is clear that he recognized the superiority of McElroy’s earlier translation in ways that are directly relevant to “Howl,” and that the key for him was not “Lamma lamma sabatchani,” which is of course the one line left untranslated and retained identically by both. The key is in the second stanza from “Cris d’aveugle” that Ginsberg reproduces and introduces in the variorum edition of his poem, with spectacular understatement, as merely how Corbière’s “poem ends” (*Howl* 135):

J’entends le vent du nord	I hear the north wind roar
Qui bugle comme un cor	It bellows like a horn
C’est l’hallali des trépassés	That halloos for those who are gone
J’aboie après mon tour assez	I have howled for my turn too long
J’entends le vent du nord	I hear the north wind roar
J’entends le glas du cor	I hear the knell of the horn

(Corbière, “Cris d’aveugle” 96)

(Corbière, “Cries of the Blind-man,”
McElroy, trans., 30)

Nothing in his preceding note prepares the reader to discover in this stanza the very title of Ginsberg’s own poem, but the significance of what might at first appear no more than a startling coincidence is underwritten by the surrounding lines. We notice at once the repetition of “cor” (“horn”), which is the very last word in Corbière’s poem, and think back to the compound noun “Goldhorn” that Ginsberg so vaguely attributed to Kerouac. Equally striking is the emphatic sonority of the translation, with its howling, roaring, bellowing, and halloos. McElroy’s version grasps the importance of Corbière’s ‘voice-images’¹² for a work intended to be sung “to a Low Breton air,” as the note below Corbière’s title explains, but this sensitivity is not captured in MacIntyre’s overly literal translation. Compare, for example, MacIntyre’s “it’s the mort for all those past return” (143) with McElroy’s “That halloos for those who are gone” (30). Even more dramatically, MacIntyre’s line “I yelp enough now for my turn” (143) is not only inferior as a rendition of “J’aboie après mon tour assez,” but far less likely to have caught Ginsberg’s attention than McElroy’s resonant “I have *howled* for my turn too long” (30). We should not underestimate Ginsberg’s attentiveness, at a time when he was making his own translations from French. In mid-August 1955, he was notably resuming work on Genet’s long, and at that time untranslated poem “Le condamné à mort,” which he had begun to translate in 1952, now helped by his neighbor in Berkeley, Guy Wernham, “the translator of Lautréamont” (Ginsberg and Kerouac 317).¹³ We can thus well imagine Ginsberg in summer 1955 at his “extra big desk” in the run-up to “Howl” with both translations of Corbière, making comparisons of the texts, and indeed of their titles. On the

one side, MacIntyre's "The Blindman's Plaint," on the other, McElroy's "Cries of the Blind-man." Very similar titles might have passed unremarked, but the difference between "Plaint" and "Cries," as much as the inadequacy of the former for an antiromantic poet,¹⁴ would surely have struck him. It is quite possible Ginsberg read the Corbière poem and its two translations and thought to himself that "Blind-man's Howl" would have made a better title.

If Ginsberg "lifted" from Corbière's last stanza the title of his own poem, it stood in for more significant stylistic affinities between the two poets, from a shared association with Christ mixing martyrdom with wry self-mockery to their aesthetics of orality (Ginsberg's "measure of poor human prose," the language of the street or Corbière's "talking pidgin," as Huysmans put it). Above all, the main achievement of "Howl" is the same as that of "Cris d'aveugle," which "tackles suffering in a monologue by a blind person whose primal cries recapture the power of vision through the force of speech" (Lunn-Rockcliffe 70). Ginsberg's poetry from "Howl" onward bears the trace of Corbière insofar as his originality too lies "in the way he subverts the clichés of the *poète maudit* and inscribes marginality in the very language of his verse" (70). And yet, while the anxiety to give Corbière credit in the variorum edition of "Howl" implies Ginsberg's recognition of meaningful debts, his cryptic hesitancy in withholding as much as he gives the reader speaks of a profound ambivalence. Why would he have had such mixed feelings about communicating the extent of his immersion in French poetry? Was it not the explicit function of his variorum edition, to elucidate the literary lineage that informed his poem, and so promote a tradition preserved in his text for the "best minds" of future generations?

As such, the edition indeed extended the role of "Howl" as the work of a *passeur*. But literary genealogies are not always passed on to readers in a spirit of magnanimousness; they

can also trigger rivalry between *passseurs*. Ginsberg's reluctance to promote Corbière could be explained by the very fact he came to him through Pound and Eliot, the "Pope and Dryden" of his day, too "hard-up and classical" for him to wish them to be associated with the future he had in mind (Ginsberg, *Howl* 156). While this conclusion is plausible, a more definite reason for his mixed feelings about Corbière confirms it, which appears in "The Lion for Real," one of a series of poems Ginsberg wrote in Paris between late 1957 and spring 1958 that can be considered as a response to the critical reception of "Howl"; that is to say, as a poem addressed to a readership that had misrecognized his poetics and misunderstood the kind of poet he aspired to be. The presence of Corbière's poetry in "The Lion for Real" is intimately connected both to that aspiration and to the anxieties that went with it.

The genesis of Ginsberg's "Lion"

Ginsberg gave "The Lion for Real" an epigraph from Corbière's "Rapsodie du sourd": "Soyez muette pour moi, contemplative Idole..."¹⁵ But to base on that intertextual relation a biographical or psychoanalytical reading of the two poems would miss the point.¹⁶ The reception of "Howl" made Ginsberg acutely aware that his American readers had almost exclusively failed to identify how indebted his work was to European, particularly French, poetics. Poems like "At Apollinaire's Grave" were, therefore, highly visible acts of homage that signaled his literary allegiances in order to invite a different kind of reading. Like "The Lion for Real," "At Apollinaire's Grave" begins with an epigraph in French, but, although it is not identified, its placement beneath the title invites readers, whatever their level of cultural knowledge, to assume correctly that its source is a poem by Apollinaire. "The Lion for Real" takes this strategy of simultaneous revelation and concealment a step further: for an

Anglophone reader of Ginsberg who doesn't understand French, the ellipsis at the end – “Soyez muette pour moi, contemplative Idole...” – is the only part that makes any sense; for a Francophone reader who doesn't recognize it as a line by Corbière, the words again seem a tease at the reader's expense; and finally, even to those who know their Corbière so well they can recognize the line, the notorious resistance of “Rapsodie du sourd” to clear interpretation means they too remain lost for words. Had Ginsberg simply named the epigraph's source, there would have been no frustrating mystery. By short-circuiting the reader's expectations, however, his epigraph not only invites a comparative reading of “The Lion for Real” with “Rapsodie du sourd,” but implies through its teasing obscurity some essential clue to his own poem's hermeneutic strategy.

On an initial approach, the two poems appear strikingly similar in style and tone. Both are conversational and reproduce dialog similar in content. Ginsberg's narrator records an exchange with his analyst that closely parallels the one between Corbière's narrator and his doctor – “l'homme de l'art,” a French phrase that interestingly blurs the distinction between a critic and a medic – in the opening lines of “Rapsodie du sourd”:

L'homme de l'art lui dit: – Fort bien, restons-en là.

Le traitement est fait: vous êtes sourd. Voilà

Comme quoi vous avez l'organe bien perdu. –

Et lui comprit trop bien, n'ayant pas entendu.

(Corbière 46)

Had Corbière been able to make a recording of his poem, as Ginsberg did of his, it would have been even clearer that both are not just oral but highly performative, to be delivered with the irony and intonation of a stand-up comedian. The second stanza of “The Lion for Real” brought the biggest laugh from Ginsberg’s live audience in 1959:

Called up my old Reichian analyst
 who’d kicked me out of therapy for smoking marijuana
 “It’s happened” I panted “There’s a lion in my room”
 “I’m afraid any discussion would have no value” he hung up.
 (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 174)

The comic dialog of Ginsberg’s poem accords in its use of direct speech with the ‘conversational-ironic’ branch of Symbolism often identified as Corbière’s style and invites similar readings. The standard interpretation of Corbière’s irony is based on the assumption that his poems are autobiographical and mask real suffering by making “seemingly irresponsible excursions into flippant language in the midst of a serious subject.”¹⁷ Likewise, the defensive character of Ginsberg’s irony would make sense in light of the biographical basis to the exchange between the poet-narrator of “The Lion for Real” and his analyst, a thinly veiled reference to the aftermath of Ginsberg’s own 1948 William Blake mystical experience, with which he had been trying to come to terms for an entire decade. In Corbière’s case, persuasive readings of “Rapsodie du sourd” have also been made based on the poet’s own partial deafness.¹⁸ Such readings of their conversational irony, however, generally fail to take into account another distinctive feature shared by the work of both poets,

since “The Lion of Real” also follows “Rapsodie du sourd” in being highly cryptic. This unusual combination explains the disconcerting tension in both poems, whose orality and light-heartedness are at odds with a baffling ambiguity about what ought to be most clear and most serious: in Corbière’s case, how the narrator’s deafness is caused and whether it is a disability or a blessing;¹⁹ in Ginsberg’s case, what the lion symbolizes “for real.”

Critics have duly proposed insightful interpretations of what Ginsberg’s lion might symbolize, from the most obvious, that is a natural stand-in for Blake’s Tyger,²⁰ to Jane Hirshfield’s subtler conclusion that it is “more multidimensional,” an “irrefutable” presence that “we can’t own or control.”²¹ Hirshfield doesn’t recognize the hermeneutic trap in the poem, however, which enables her to find a “path to resolution” that, I would argue, goes against the text’s resistance to such analysis (11). The poem went through a process of revision that reveals both Corbière’s impact on it and Ginsberg’s attempts to short-circuit this hunt for the lion’s symbolism. A comparative reading of the poem’s two drafts – the first in his journal, the other an enclosure in a letter to Peter Orlovsky²² – shows him turning toward an irony, or rather a meta-irony, derived from Corbière and designed to obfuscate the very critical desire for clarity that it triggers.

Entitled “Making the Lion for All It’s Got – A Ballad,” the first draft features the lion but very little else that would appear in the final text. The ten-stanza poem begins in an absurdist-political style familiar from earlier works like “America,” a debt acknowledged by its opening line: “A lion met America” (Ginsberg, *Journals* 438). The second half becomes more personal and both figuratively and literally self-reflexive (“Back to my own face in the mirror”), creating a structural bifurcation that suggests an unresolved conflict in the poem’s identity and purpose. In 1987, Ginsberg annotated the draft to acknowledge its provenance as

a “little imitation of Stephen Crane’s ‘In the desert’” (438), a short late nineteenth-century poem that is highly ironic; but the fact he aborted it seems to confirm the creative limitations of Crane’s irony compared with the value of Corbière’s meta-irony.

Certainly, the shift from one source to another is evident in the second draft Ginsberg sent to Peter Orlovsky on April 1, 1958 and is very close to the final text. Although the epigraph from “Rapsodie du sourd” does not appear yet on the second draft, it includes a wink to Corbière’s poem that Ginsberg later cut. That is, both this draft and the published version feature “deafening”: while the poet-narrator confronts the roaring lion in his apartment, he glances at the outside world “standing in deafening stillness” (Ginsberg and Orlovsky 155). But the draft underlines the poem’s relation to Corbière’s by repeating the tell-tale word in the penultimate line: “I have heard your direct and deafening promise” (156). Ginsberg thus tempts us to recognize Corbière’s “Rapsodie du sourd” at what are the two most visionary moments in his poem, and while the allusions remain easier to miss than to recognize, that is only consistent with his cryptic strategy of appropriation going back to “Howl.” By cutting the second of his two references to Corbière’s “Rapsodie” from the published version, Ginsberg actively increased the poem’s level of genealogical encryption.

Comparing the second draft and published version also shows more substantial cuts that made the poem more cryptic. In particular, while Ginsberg retained a transparently biographical reference to his parents (“your dear Father hath no lion / You said your mother was mad”), it seems incidental to the poem as a whole, which is because he removed the entire stanza that came after the exchange with the Reichian analyst:

My father & I shrank from each other tearful & shaking

He blamed it on my mother's nervous breakdown
 I tried to insist I never actually saw a Lion
 He didn't believe me & went to his job in the Zoo.
 (Ginsberg and Orlovsky 155)

The punning of “shrank” on the analyst as a “shrink” and the stanza as a whole in the draft made the father and son dynamic central to the poem, thereby suggesting “Professor Kandinsky” (modeled on Lionel Trilling, Ginsberg’s former Columbia University professor) was another father figure.²³ None of these interlinked figures – the father, the analyst, or the professor – value the visionary Lion. However, the ‘real’ father has a “job in the Zoo,” which makes him symbolically the most significant, since by inference Louis Ginsberg’s work was the same as the lion-obsessed narrator’s, that is to say, poetry. But when Ginsberg cut that quatrain, he obfuscated the possibility that the relation between father and son is also – as it was for Louis and Allen – one between fellow writers. While Ginsberg had no need of Corbière’s example to meditate on his own literary relationship with his father, what Tristan Tzara observed about the simultaneous admiration and bitterness in Corbière’s dedication of *Les amours jaunes* to “l’auteur du *Négrier*” seems directly relevant: “Dans cette ambivalence, où adhésion et opposition se résorbent en un conflit constant et producteur, me semble résider une des principales déterminantes de l’esprit de révolte de Tristan Corbière, tel qu’il se définit sur la voie de la poésie.”²⁴ By cutting down the presence of his father in the final version of “The Lion for Real,” instead of entirely cutting it, Ginsberg let the relationship stand while obscuring its relevance for the poem’s own internal conflicts.

At the time of writing the draft, Ginsberg himself suggested he had gone too far with this “pretty strangesick poem” (Ginsberg and Orlovsky 157): “I didn’t know what I was writing, so it maybe goof on personal details so shouldn’t publish” (154). His disclaimer of responsibility has the effect of a double negative, however, implying that he knew exactly what he was writing. And the same goes for his cuts and revisions, since they had the effect of rooting the poem less and less in psychoanalytical dynamics and more and more in the mystical Blakean vision and its aesthetic effects: “My eye caught the edge of the red neighbor apartment building standing in deafening silence” (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 174). The trace of Corbière’s “Deaf Man’s Rhapsody” Ginsberg chose to retain has indeed nothing to do with Oedipal rivalry and everything to do with a visionary experience to which the only adequate response is silence. Here, Ginsberg may well have had in mind the closing epigram of “Rapsodie du sourd”: “Le silence est d’or” (Corbière 50).

The hermeneutic Tantalus of Corbière and Ginsberg

What, then, does Ginsberg’s Lion stand for? Is it no more than a hermeneutic red herring, and is hunting for its meaning, trying to turn its roar into words, just a wild goose chase? The answer lies in the way the overall structure of “The Lion for Real” follows that of “Rapsodie du sourd,” in particular how the tonality of both poems’ conclusions clashes with the dozen preceding quatrains. Up until the end, chiasmic structures and a lack of punctuation in both poems sustain a central confusion about who is who and what is what. Ginsberg’s search for the lion’s meaning, and thereby the reader’s desire for it, is thus constantly frustrated by the difficulty of separating self from other: “stopped eating myself he got weaker and roared at night while I had nightmares / Eaten by lion in bookstore on Cosmic Campus, a

lion myself starved by Professor / Kandisky, dying in a lion's flophouse circus" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 175). Corbière's poem not only features this same disorientating formal device, but also connects it to a frustration of the reader's desire for understanding through the same imagery of eating: "Hystérique tourment d'un Tantale acoustique!" (Corbière 48). Corbière's invocation of Tantalus, doomed to an eternity of finding food just out of reach, provides a perfect model for Ginsberg, as does his depiction of torment as hysterical. For both poems thwart potential psycho-biographical readings by ironizing with a kind of hysteria their narrators' serious mental and physical conditions. Where Ginsberg introduces fantastical creatures – "Tiglon Hippogriff Unicorn" (*Collected Poems* 174) – Corbière had an entire orchestra of bizarre instruments – "Bats en branle ce bon tam-tam, chaudron fêlé" (Corbière 48) – and in both cases they lead to an entirely unexpected climax.

"The Lion for Real" "roughly follows" Corbière's structure, as Ginsberg himself later noted,²⁵ by ending with the same odd twist, making a startling shift in tone that abruptly replaces chaos with clarity, a wild performance with a solemn prayer. Deconstructing the very deconstruction of symbolism that has gone before, the tone of both endings appears to abandon all irony. Thus Ginsberg's poet-narrator addresses the divinity: "In this life I have heard your promise I am ready to die I have served / Your starved and ancient Presence O Lord I wait in my room at your Mercy" (*Collected Poems* 175); and, with calm harmony and symmetrical perfection, with a strong alliteration in "r" suggesting a restful humming where before there was mad cacophony, Corbière's poet-narrator addresses the "contemplative Idole": "Vous ne me direz mot: je ne répondrai rien... / Et rien ne pourra dédorer l'entretien" (Corbière 50). Whereas Ginsberg revised the opening line of "Howl" and replaced "mystical" by "hysterical," in the final lines of "The Lion for Real" he moved in precisely the opposite

direction, shifting from the undercutting ironic hysteria of the previous ten stanzas to a serious idealistic mysticism in the last.

The ultimate irony of both poems' irony – their meta-irony – is that their endings are all the more disturbing for seeming to be “straight.” Readings of Ginsberg's poem that assume he finally drops the masks of a defensive self-mocking irony for the ‘real thing’ miss this, miss the uncertainty that paradoxically results from such sudden clarity. Tracing Ginsberg's ending back to Corbière's reveals the same effect, since of course the conclusion that “silence is golden” is both wisdom and an empty cliché that would satisfy no reader. The meta-irony of Corbière's “Rapsodie” has a certain Zen-like quality to it that chimes with the Buddhist response given to the poet-narrator of “The Lion for Real.” For his “novelist friend,” Joey, clearly tells him that there is in fact no Lion, “no Self and No Bars” (*Collected Poems* 174). Joey's metaphysical solution would put an end to the poem, terminating its hermeneutic lion hunt and translating its confusions of self and other into a neat transcendence of dualisms. The narrator's response is to be left “confused, dazed and exalted,” however, embodying the self-doubts that Ginsberg expressed when sending Orlovsky the second draft of his poem, telling him that what made “The Lion for Real” “true” was the anxiety that he himself was “not really Zen or enlightened” but just “a hungry no-man” (Ginsberg and Orlovsky 157). The symbolic Lion is, then, the punishment of Tantalus, a temptation of enlightenment forever out of reach, calling into doubt its possibility. Corbière's poem could not decide for Ginsberg so fundamental an indecision about the self's enlightenment or existence – what could? – which is perhaps why he responded with a parallel indecision to its conclusion in praise of silence. It is thus entirely fitting that Ginsberg's epigraph to “The Lion for Real” should simultaneously pay homage to his source text and make its provenance a tantalizing mystery, for, in the end,

solving the riddle of its origins in Corbière's "Rapsodie du sourd" still leaves us no closer to the riddle of the 'real' itself.

Lancaster University

Notes

¹ Tristan Corbière, "Les amours Jaunes," *The Centenary Corbière*, Val Warner, trans. (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), 2-120.

² C. F. MacIntyre, "Introduction," *Tristan Corbière: Selections from Les amours jaunes*, MacIntyre, trans. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1954), 10.

³ See Jason Shinder, *The Poem that Changed America: Howl, Fifty Years Later* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

⁴ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript and Variant Versions*, Barry Miles, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 134-35.

⁵ James Breslin, "Allen Ginsberg: The Origins of 'Howl' and 'Kaddish,'" *The Iowa Review*, 8:2 (Spring 1977): 82-108.

⁶ This article extends to Corbière the analysis of Ginsberg's "poetics of open secrecy" I proposed in relation to his appropriation of Apollinaire and Genet in Chapter 5 of *The French Genealogy of the Beat Generation: Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac's Appropriations of Modern Literature, from Rimbaud to Michaux* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 115-42.

⁷ Walter McElroy's translation of Corbière's *Poems* (Pawlett: Banyon Press, 1947) is part of a reading list dating from 1947 (Allen Ginsberg, *The Book of Martyrdom* [New York: Da Capo Press, 2008], 246-47).

⁸ See Francis Burch, *Tristan Corbière: L'originalité des Amours jaunes et leur influence sur T. S. Eliot* (Paris: Nizet, 1970).

⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Tristan Corbière," *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 88.

¹⁰ Allen Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties: 1954-58* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 213.

¹¹ *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters*, Bill Morgan and David Stanford, eds. (New York: Penguin, 2011), 287.

¹² Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe, *Tristan Corbière and the Poetics of Irony* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2006), 68-72.

¹³ A line from Ginsberg's translation of Genet's poem appeared in the first draft of "Howl" before being cut in revision (Ginsberg, *Howl* 23; Lane 137-39).

¹⁴ "Cris d'aveugle" is admittedly one of Corbière's most serious poems, but reading it as a romantic complaint not only disconnects it from its context – the wryness of *Les amours jaunes* – but fails to notice Corbière's anti-romanticism inhabits the structures it borrows to disintegrate them better; see Serge Meitinger, "L'ironie antiromantique de Tristan Corbière," *Littérature*, 51 (1983): 41-58.

¹⁵ Ginsberg's epigraph misquotes Corbière here, inverting the last two words.

¹⁶ Seeking to uncover who was Ginsberg's mysterious "idol" would undoubtedly lead to the same dead-ends as critical attempts to reveal the identity of Corbière's mysterious dedicatee, "Madame D."

¹⁷ C. M. Shanahan, "Irony in Laforgue, Corbière, and Eliot," *Modern Philology*, 53:2 (1955): 121.

¹⁸ See Chapter 4 of Henri Thomas, *Tristan le dépossédé: Tristan Corbière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 95-123.

¹⁹ As Lunn-Rockliffe points out, the use of the term "crédit" in line 7 of Corbière's poem suggests the patient perversely paid for the privilege of becoming deaf (158).

²⁰ See Edward Larrissy, *Blake and Modern Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 120.

²¹ Jane Hirshfield, "Facing the Lion: The Way of Shadow and Light in Some Twentieth-Century Poems," *American Poetry Review*, 24:5 (1995): 11.

²² Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, *Straight Hearts' Delight: Love Poems and Selected Letters 1947-1980*, Winston Leyland, ed. (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1980), 155-56.

²³ Famously, Ginsberg dedicated the poem to his former professor when reading it in 1959 at Columbia University, and Trilling's wife, Diana, equally famously misread the tone, getting the pun (Lion/Lionel) but missing Ginsberg's irony. See Robert Genter, "'I'm Not His Father': Lionel Trilling, Allen Ginsberg, and the Contours of Literary Modernism," *College Literature*, 31:2 (Spring 2004): 22-52.

²⁴ Tristan Tzara, "Tristan Corbière et les limites du cri," *Europe* (1950): 90-91.

²⁵ Sleeve notes on the 1989 recording of "The Lion for Real" cited on The Allen Ginsberg Project, where Ginsberg's 1959, 1973 and 1989 readings of the poem can be heard: <https://z.umn.edu/3ukr>.