[PARTIAL EXCERPT]

Torchbearers and Drunken Furnace-Lighters:
Postmodern Perspectives on Literary Legacy and the Role of the Poet

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A poetic era is not an isolated incident of stylistic and ideological choices; rather, each generation is influenced by its preceding eras: Poets may hearken back to prior sentiments, refute the ideas of predecessors, or transform the existing ideologies of their poetic ancestors. Even the postmodern era, characterized by a diversity of thought and style, is not immune to the impact of poetic legacy. Several postmodern poets look over their shoulders at their ancestors for varying reasons – Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg, and W.S. Merwin are some of the most notable postmodern voices in this regard. These three authors directly reference the legacy left by their poetic predecessors. In his poems "A Supermarket in California" and "Personals Ad," Ginsberg responds to multiple poets (most notably Walt Whitman) with a sense of reverence, awe, and kinship. Likewise, Levertov looks to her poetic ancestors with respect and admiration in her poem "September 1961;" however, she also expresses anxiety over the responsibility of carrying the torch. Merwin expresses admiration for his poetic predecessors in "Lament for the Makers," but does not cast himself as a torchbearer or legacy-preserver in his poem "The Drunk in the Furnace." Instead, he sees himself as a noisy lost soul; the abandoned furnace functions as a metaphor for what Merwin perceives as a void and hollow literary legacy. Where Ginsberg and Levertov look to their literary predecessors as reliable sources to comprehend and evaluate their own roles as poets, Merwin suggests that poetic legacy does not offer any tangible meaning, and ultimately posits that the poet has no definitive role.

Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" features Whitman not only as a main character, but also in a role that functions as something close to a secondary speaker. The poem's cadences and appearance on the page directly mimic Whitman's style. In his piece "Modernist Looking: Surreal Impressions in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg," which analyzes the influence of prior poets on Ginsberg's work, Dr. Brian Jackson of the University of Illinois at Springfield asserts that Ginsberg's poetry frequently features "Whitmanian long lines with surrealistic troping" (310). These long, 'Whitmanian lines' are noticeable before even reading the poem. The surrealism enters the poem almost immediately, with a speaker who focuses on the seemingly mundane in a spirit of celebration: "What peaches and penumbras! […] "Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!" (Ginsberg 3). Even Ginsberg's use of the exclamation mark throughout "A Supermarket in California" is reminiscent of Whitman, who used 82 exclamation marks in his 1892 publication of *Song of Myself*, often stringing series of celebratory exclamations together: "Vivas to those who have fail'd! / And to those whose war-vessels sank in the sea! / And to those themselves who sank in the sea!" (Whitman 18.7-9). Whitman had a propensity for celebration, as seen here, in his celebration of failure. In the same style and playful spirit, Ginsberg celebrates the seemingly mundane — produce and the nuclear family, for one.

This poem's tone also offers a playfulness and affection towards Walt Whitman as a parental figure. In his imagined encounter with Whitman, Ginsberg teasingly observes him "eyeing the grocery boys" while browsing through the meat section (4). He also expresses a longing for this encounter to be real: "I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd" is the only line enclosed in parentheses, and it functions as a confession of weakness, yearning, and uncertainty to both the reader and to Whitman himself

(9). Most notably, at the end of the poem, Ginsberg refers to Whitman as “dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher,” conveying a sense of not only respect and admiration, but of love for his predecessor (12). Ginsberg feels a connection to Whitman that extends beyond literary inspiration; he views Whitman not only as a predecessor, but as a family member.