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Bombs, Shapes and Sounds: A joint analysis of Gregory Corso's "Bomb" and Allen Ginsberg's "Hum Bom!"

By Alexandre FERRERE

Résumé : Ce travail se propose d'étudier deux œuvres d'écrivains de la Beat Generation : « Bomb » de Gregory Corso et « Hum Bom! » d'Allen Ginsberg. Bien que tous deux soient construits autour d'une variation thématique sur la bombe, ils utilisent deux stratégies poétiques différentes. Le premier est un poème visuel, prenant la forme d'un champignon nucléaire, tandis que le second est un poème sonore dans lequel est développé tout un travail sur le son et le rythme. Cet article analyse ces deux stratégies différentes mais complémentaires qui se retrouvent au cœur du travail et de la philosophie de chaque poète et explore ces dimensions ajoutées ainsi que leurs fonctions et expérimentations poétiques respectives.

Mots-clefs : Beat Generation ; Poésie de guerre ; Poésie visuelle ; Poésie sonore ; Contre-culture

Abstract: This study offers an exploration of two works, both composed by Beat writers: Gregory Corso's "Bomb" and Allen Ginsberg's "Hum Bom!". While both are centered around bomb-themed variations, they display two different poetic strategies. Corso's work is a visual poem, taking the shape of a nuclear mushroom cloud, whereas Ginsberg's work is a sound poem in which is developed a profound work on sonorities and rhythm. This article analyzes those two different but complementary strategies which form the core of the work and beliefs of both poets and study these added dimensions to the written word as well as their respective poetic functions and experimentations.

Keywords: Beat Generation ; War Poetry ; Visual Poetry ; Sound Poetry ; Counter-culture

The so-called Beat Generation, the group of artists which became famous in the late 1950s, can be described as a direct product of World War II. Their works are indeed characterized by a quest for freedom, equality and awareness, partly as a response to the horrors of the war. This influential group also took part in a long-time and virulent anti-war activism as can be seen in the works of artists orbiting around this wide group such as the painting/installation created by Wally Hedrick titled *The War Room*, *The Revolutionary Letters* of Diane di Prima, the lyrics of Ed Sanders' band The Fugs, Tuli Kupferberg's humorous book *1001 Way to Beat the Draft* or Lawrence Ferlinghetti's broadside "Where is Vietnam?". In that context, two poems stand out for the new dimensions they add to the written word and by summoning the readers' senses participation: Gregory Corso's mushroom-shaped poem "Bomb" and Allen Ginsberg's heavily cadenced piece 'Hum Bom!'. Arguing that both poems

are transgressing and expanding poetical conventions, this paper is thus an exploration of these two bomb-themed poetical works, with a particular focus on the stress and tensions the two poets worked with in their respective compositions. Beginning with Corso's "Bomb" before moving towards a study of Ginsberg's "Hum Bom!", this paper will also underline how the poems' shapes and sounds form the core of both poet's poetical and political stances.

Gregory Corso, often called the fourth member of the Beat Generation along with Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, played an important and distinctive part in the poetical field by the end of the fifties. After a rough start in life, including incarcerations where he discovered poetry, he set himself up in Paris, in a seedy nameless hotel he called himself the Beat Hotel (Miles 2002, 106) where he composed his poem "Bomb"—first edited as a broadside by Lawrence Ferlinghetti for *City Lights* (Skau 2005, 72) and then published as a foldout in Corso's third poetry collection *The Happy Birthday of Death*. One striking feature of this particular poem is its shape—a feature that was of utmost importance for Corso who wanted his poem to be printed on a single sheet to make it look like a mushroom cloud (Corso 2003, 111), a shape easily and immediately recognizable, echoing the design of the book's cover. Corso was confronted to formatting problems for the publication of his poem, writing for example "NO MAGAZINE WOULD PRINT IT AS I wanted" in a letter (138) and suggesting that he should print it himself in order to obtain the mushroom cloud he had in mind (111). Another example of the importance of poem's shape is Ferlinghetti's letter in which he accepted to print it as a broadside and included a sketch suggesting the overall mushroom form the poem should take once published (Columbia 2010). All those elements point to the central importance of shape for Corso's poem: a reference to the global context of nuclear threats—"America first with the bomb" Corso would write in 1963, ironizing on the nationalist slogan (Corso 2003, 335)—but also to his immediate environment at the time he composed this poem. On September 2nd, 1958, Corso wrote to poet Peter Orlovsky, who was also Allen Ginsberg's lover, about his time in Paris:

Dear Peter, Paris in an uproar. Arabas FLN have taken to war in city, they have in past week killed ten cops and four soldiers (mostly on dark streets and in Metros). Yesterday they blew up around here and killed nine. (Corso 2003, p. 136)

He would also write a letter to Donald Allen on the same day, detailing the dreadful situation ("Paris teeming with war. Arabs killing police and soldiers and blowing up cafes") (136), and would also describe his terrifying experience in Paris in a similar letter to Ferlinghetti:

Paris is boiling with trouble, Arabas have placed their war here. Last night cafe a block away blown up, dead nine. They are killing soldiers in Metros, and many police. (136)

And with this poetic gesture, Corso also placed himself in the tradition of pattern poetry, defined as the harmony between the meaning of words and their physical representations; the most famous example is George Herbert's "Easter Wings" published in 1633, and later Guillaume Apollinaire would give his pattern poems the name of calligrams. Though pattern poems originally use geometric figures,¹ the mushroom shape gives a stronger impact to the poem's ideas and visually builds the reality of the bomb's threat. To a certain extent and because of the importance of form in Corso's poem and its theme, "Bomb" can be compared with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's work "A Tumultuous Assembly" composed after World War I. Indeed, besides the fact that both have been produced after a war, both focus on the interplay between words and their representations on the page. But while the Italian futurist deconstructs, Gregory Corso reconstructs a representation of war. Considering words as more than words, using them as raw materials to build a physical and symbolic representation in a context of war was also practiced by other poets, such as e.e. cummings who worked on the typographic aspect of poetry in his war poems like "a Woman". In fact, just like Rick Rylance stated in *War Poetry*, "modern approaches to familiar problems adjust our sense of their importance" (Featherstone xiii), and Corso did just that: he pushed his readers to see and feel a physical representation of a new but familiar threat.

But what is even more interesting with Corso's "Bomb" is his deliberate choice to represent a mushroom cloud as a poem—the paroxysmic symbol of annihilation of existence, of the destruction of mankind, and thus of literature, as a literary object. This gesture is a reversal one; Corso hijacked the tradition of pattern poetry which is usually an ode to an object or an animal and dedicated his poem to an anti-poetic but, and this is important, a human, creation. The content of the poem itself seemed to have suffer from the explosion: "grassy clarion air", "marble helmsmen" (Corso 1960, 32-33)... It is as if the explosion had scattered and blended words throughout the mushroom cloud, leaving the poem in a state of confusion and the reader in stunned position.

This provocative take on poetry and war goes even further in the language of the poem itself, with the poet addressing directly the bomb in ambiguous lines ("O Bomb I love you")

¹ "Among the shapes commonly represented in such poems have been axes, eggs, spears, altars, wings, columns, pyramids, diamonds, and other geometric figures." (Preminger 607-608)

(32-33) or even showing pity to it (“Poor little bomb”) (32-33). Corso’s dark humor builds against preconceptions—as a bomb cannot be loved (reminding a famous line from *Dr. Strangelove* which would appear six years later)—but also against his peers’ conceptions since it seems to go opposite to pacifist notions and anti-war movements. This explains why the audience—consisting of members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament—was shocked when Corso read it in public: “they showed their feelings by removing their shoes and throwing them at Gregory, calling him a fascist” (Miles 2000, 113). Though this story may have been exaggerated, Gregory Corso was indeed insulted and “jeered” (Hugh-Jones); and a review in *Time* magazine considered the last lines as an example of “Beat Blather” (Kraemer Hoff 211). But it seems that this part of the audience misunderstood Gregory Corso’s point. As he wrote: “A parody really, but they couldn’t get it—anyway, it did bug them” (Corso 2003, 105). First, the poem is mostly ironic, as is the antithetical title of the volume, in the same vein as Stephen Crane’s poem “War is Kind”. For example, Gregory Corso frequently used apostrophe and lyrical pronouns to imitate an ode, like in the line “O Bomb thy BOOM his tomb” (Corso 1960, 32-33). The gap between the language, its musicality and the tricky subject of the poem adds absurdity to the very act of bombing and to the Cold War arms race: the poem, imitating a love poem, is therefore flirting with craziness—Corso sometimes referred to his poem as his “crazy “Bomb” poem” (Corso 2003, 105). Some lines also reveal this surrealist situation, using the power of humor to denounce, as in “I want to kiss your clank eat your boom” (Corso 1960, 32-33) and avoiding lamentations; a poetic choice he explained:

[...] the only way for me to do this was not to say “O Bomb how terrible you are,”
but to say “O Bomb I love you, I want to put a wig of goldilocks on your baldy bean,
a lollipop in your furcal mouth...” (Corso 2003, 355)

Moreover, Corso wrote in one of his letters that the poem is “all about the bomb being lonely and sad because everybody wants to die by cars drowning electric chairs, but not by Bomb” (Corso 2003, 105). The same idea is to be found at the very beginning of the poem in the line “you’re no crueller than cancer” (Corso 1960, 32-33); for Corso, death is death and it is already omnipresent. What is more is that, in this poem, the bomb is not to blame because it simply is a human creation, a growth or an extension of knowledge and a mirror of mankind. For example, a line like “bomb / you are as cruel as man makes you” (32-33) invites the reader to think about who is really to be blamed. Corso is thus pointing at the ambiguity of fearing the bomb but not who created it—and he composed a poem in a mushroom cloud shape to that extent: a product of mankind which, like bombs, is simply a human creation, the main difference being that one is an opening and the other a destruction. This paradoxical situation also echoes

Diane di Prima's "the vortex of creation is the vortex of destruction" in her "Revolutionary Letter #12" (20); and Corso's poem seems to bear this motto throughout the lines and the chosen shape, as the creative impulse is crystalized in a destructive shape, and destruction is immortalized in a creative work. This endless mirror effect plays like a kaleidoscope, the form reflecting mankind's potential auto-annihilation, the poetic gestures inviting reflections after reflections, the paradoxical view of the bomb as an artifact to celebrate... As he wrote: "my Bomb poem is a hundred different poems" (Corso 2003, 211). But this poem is not a direct pamphlet against the bomb, offering "no impetus to fight to change the system" according to Christine Hoff Kraemer (211). Corso even stated that this poem was not meant to be neither political nor lampoonist:

If I start with hating it [the bomb], with the hate of it, I get no farther than a piece of polemic, a political poem—which I usually fall flat on. That's not a political poem exactly, that "Bomb" poem". (Miles 2000, 107)

On the contrary, the subtlety of the poem is Corso's insistence that the bomb is a creation we all should embrace and welcome, that we must learn to live with it and look into our own creations—according to Corso, we could even laugh at/with it:

That I am unable to hate what is necessary to love

That I can't exist in a world that consents

A child in a park a man dying in an electric-chair

That I am able to laugh at all things (Corso 1960, 32-33)

In other words, if we are to embrace human creations such as a poem, we thus should be welcoming the bomb as part of our own existence—that is to say to avoid the hypocrisy of celebrating the best while hiding the worst, to see them as two sides of the same coin and to accept that they live together: it is "necessary to love" it, there is no escape. Corso declared in this context that the poem's "content is one of love, love for life, love for man" (Corso 2003, 133). This is conveyed by the numerous and various references to scales (from neutrons to the universe), places (from the Bronx to Istanbul), eras (from swords to the bomb) and religions (from Zeus to Buddha).

Though this "love for man" is, as he wrote in his poem, a consequence of his role as a poet (Corso 1960, 32-33), this nevertheless results into a paradoxical feeling of humanity within the idea of the bomb. According to him, he chose to conclude the poem with "bitterness", after struggling between "light or profundity" and "humor", (Corso 2003, 112) because "[...] in the

hearts of men to come more bombs will be born” (Corso 1960, 32-33). However, the poet admitted in a letter that someday the poem might end in a lighter way (Corso 2003, 112), creating therefore a global and universal poem that would be adaptable as time went by.

Another interesting feature of this poem is that it also plays on sounds, as the last part mimicking explosions with the help of capital letters, onomatopoeias and assonances clearly shows:

O resound thy tanky knees
BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM
BOOM ye skies and BOOM ye suns
BOOM BOOM ye moons ye stars BOOM
nights ye BOOM ye days ye BOOM
BOOM BOOM ye winds ye clouds ye rains
go BANG ye lakes ye oceans BING
Barracuda BOOM and cougar BOOM
Ubangi BOOM orangutang
BING BANG BONG BOOM bee bear baboon
ye BANG ye BONG ye BING (Corso 1960, 32-33)

This tends to demonstrate that two dimensions are at work in Corso’s poem: the immediate visual shape and its sonorous quality. In fact, as Gregory Corso put it himself: “when it’s read, it’s a sound poem” (Miles 2000, 107). As a consequence, not only are the words colliding into one another building the dense mushroom cloud in terms of meaning, but their sounds also provide the poem with a new layer of texture. Corso’ poem then invades the reader’s sense and perceptions to pervade their minds with a new reflection on the bomb—it is both an explosion of the senses and an explosion of the mind.

The playing on sounds is the main characteristic of Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Hum Bom!”² Allen Ginsberg is mostly known for his long groundbreaking poem “Howl”, as well as for his lifelong anti-war activism. He participated in many public protests, especially against the Vietnam war and, of course, many of his poems convey his active pacifism. One example

² A rendition of it by Allen Ginsberg can be heard here: Kintzer, Assaf. “Allen Ginsberg - Hum Bomb.” *Youtube* (8 Jul. 2013), www.youtube.com/watch?v=swwZO3LUm5Q.

is from “America” where he addressed America just like Corso did with the bomb: “America when will you end the human war? / Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb” (Ginsberg 154). In the same poem, Allen Ginsberg already played with sounds and meaning, transforming “Ugh” to “Hah” to a final “Help”:

That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black

Niggers. Hah. Her make us all work sixteen hours a day. Help. (156)

But the protest poem “Hum Bom!” appears to deepen Ginsberg’s exploration of sound poetry. This poem has a rather peculiar history as it was written over a twenty-year period: a first part was composed in 1971 (1004-1005), a second one (which was modified in the final version) in 1984 (1005-1007)³ and a last part in 1991 (1007-1008). Furthermore, at least two parts were composed in response to a conflict. The first was written just after Allen Ginsberg visited the Jessore Road refugee camp during the Bangladesh Liberation War (Allen Ginsberg Project 2018) and, according to him, this part “codifies a longer improvisation in a Southern church at an antiwar rally marking U.S. carpet-bombing North Vietnam” (Hoffman 145). The last part is a straightforward reference to the Gulf War, as can be understood from the explicit mentions of Saddam Hussein and George H. W. Bush:

Saddam said he hadda bomb!

Bush said he better bomb!

[...]

Hadda get ridda Saddam with a Bomb!

Hadda get ridda Saddam with a Bomb!

[...]

Saddam’s still there building a bomb!

Saddam’s still there building a bomb! (Ginsberg 1007)

It seems that the 1984 part was specifically written for a recording with Elvin Jones, hence the dedication. But this is also the year the *New York Times* published a blacklist of people banned from “government-sponsored overseas speaking engagements”, which included Allen Ginsberg (Miles 2002, 510-512).

³ See: Ginsberg 2006, 577 for the unaltered version.

Ginsberg's aim in this poem is to mimic the sounds of wars through repetitive lines and the omnipresence of alliterations and assonances; meant to be read out loud—as showed by Ginsberg's own various renditions⁴—the poem can therefore be situated more precisely between a performance poem and a sound poem. In fact, the very title sets the mood. First of all, it reveals the importance of sound as an evolutive quality of a word since “Hum Bom!” later becomes “Whom bomb?” in the poem (Ginsberg 1004). This evolution implies that Allen Ginsberg put the emphasis on the very sounds of the words, free from their spellings, to indicate that the phonemic realization of the words is of significance here, perhaps even more than their meanings. The original title chosen for this poem was “Hūṃ Bom!”, a spelling which is to be linked with Allen Ginsberg's practice of Buddhism, since it is usually used in mantras like “oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ”. During a 1993 reading, Ginsberg also explained:

And then the.. continued consideration with a poem I had begun, May 1971, and then added every ten years a new section, based on the Shaivite cry when Shaivite saddhus in India in the burning grounds smoke a chillum of marijuana, they raise a clay pipe to their foreheads and say “HUM BOM!” or “BOM BOM MAHADEV!” (The Allen Ginsberg Project 2017)

He also declared in an interview that chanting was a link to yoga and meditation which led to experiments like “Hum Bom!” (Portugés 131). This point is interesting because it blends the horror of war and the calm of meditation, materialistic destruction and spiritual awareness—a mantra being a spiritual tool to be repeated rhythmically and continuously, just like the poet does in this poem. The orality of the poem is also underlined on the page in the spelling of expressions like “whydja”, “hadda” or “wanna” (Ginsberg 1007), and in his performances, one can notice that Allen Ginsberg hammers a kind of playful, primitive rhythm that progressively evolves into a more aggressive pattern. Indeed, Ginsberg expands several rhythms, from very distinct accentuated words to violent contractions like “whatdid” or “musta” (1006). In that sense, words like “whom” or “bomb” offer a structural rhythm for the poem which can lead to multiple interpretations, from an angry crowd of striking workers to an ironic and aggressive cheerleading.⁵ In fact, the difference between the usual accentuation of a word and Ginsberg's own accentuation led Patrick Dunn to write that “patterns of pitch accent are repeated, often without concern for their pragmatic meaning” (84). The aim of Allen Ginsberg in his readings

⁴ Bono also performed it a few years ago The Allen Ginsberg Project. “Hum Bom - (Bono & Juan Felipe Herrera).” *The Allen Ginsberg Project* (9 Apr. 2017) <http://allenginsberg.org/2017/04/hum-bom-april-9/>, as well as Ai Weiwei very recently (The Allen Ginsberg Project. “Hum Bom”. *Youtube* (3 Nov. 2022) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQOn4k90VIk>).

⁵ A type of poetic construction Ginsberg would also use in his most famous poems like “Howl” or “America” for example, the two poems being written with extensive use of anaphora.

of this poem is mostly on hammering natural sounds, with a focus on emotion, implying that the emotional response to the sounds is more powerful than to the concrete meaning; one of the reasons why this poem evokes sufferings and destructions so strongly without even mentioning them directly. Moreover, and as can be heard in the second part, rhythm is also a fundamental feature of the poem:

Who said bomb?

Who said we hadda bomb? (Ginsberg 1006)

In the audio version, Allen Ginsberg insisted on the syllabic division of the lines, playing with rhythm. While the first verse in the example above contains three syllables, the second one doubles it. Another interesting example can be found in the first part:

What do we do?

You bomb! You bomb them! (1005)

The rhythmic pattern here is almost jazzy, due to a virtual offbeat implied by the first exclamation mark:

What do we do?

1 2 3 4

You bomb! You bomb them!

1 2 (0) 1 2 3

The powerful sonorous quality of the poem is thus intrinsically linked to its rhythmic construction, working as a basic structure to convey the idea of war, of bombing and of destruction. Furthermore, it seems that ‘Hum Bom!’ could be read (or heard) like a modern ‘Beat! Beat! Drums!’, the famous poem written by Walt Whitman:

Beat! beat! drum! – blow! bugles! blow!

Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,

Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,

Into the school where the scholar is studying; (Whitman 237)

At least five elements in this poem are to be found in Ginsberg’s ‘Hum Bom!’: a very specific rhythm—Michael Moon speaks of ‘martial rhythm’ (237), a shared emphasis on sounds (for example the alliterations in [b] in the first verse), an extensive use of repetitions and anaphora

(like “through” or “into the”) as well as of exclamation marks, and a direct bond with the reader/listener.

This last point leads us to the particular use of pronouns in “Hum Bom!”. Allen Ginsberg uses two main pronouns in the poem, “we” and “you”, and he plays on what these pronouns refer to. Sometimes we understand that they refer to countries or political institutions though sometimes, they refer to individuals against the institutions responsible for the bomb, implying therefore the active participation of the reader/listener. If we take examples from the first and second stanzas, as well as from the third and fourth ones, there is a kind of (distorted) mirror effect between them (Ginsberg 1004-1005):⁶

First stanza

Whom bomb?

We bomb’d *them*!

Second stanza

Whom bomb?

You bomb *you*!

Third stanza

What do we do?

Who do *we* bomb?

Fourth stanza

What do we do?

You bomb! *You* bomb *them*!

This split reaches a climax in passages where the pronouns “we” and “you” disappear to become “they”, as to separate “they” (who are responsible for the wars) from “we” and “you” (the poet and the reader/listener):

They wanteda bomb!

They neededa bomb!

[...]

They thought they hadda bomb!

They thought they hadda bomb! (1006-1007)

But the notion of camp is totally wiped out when it comes to the victims of wars, reinforcing the idea that death knows no boundaries, as shown by the use of pronouns in the following passage:

⁶ Emphasis mine.

Whom bomb?

We bomb you!

Whom bomb?

You bomb you! (1005)⁷

The third part sounds like an aggravation of the bombing in the sense that Ginsberg builds a progressive outburst of apocalyptic sounds and meanings:

Armageddon for the mob

Gog & Magog Gog & Magog

Armageddon for the mob

Gog & Magog Gog & Magog

Gog & Magog Gog & Magog

Gog Magog Gog Magog

Gog & Magog Gog & Magog

Gog Magog Gog Magog

Gog Magog Gog Magog

Gog Magog Gog Magog

Gog Magog Gog Magog

Gog Magog Gog Magog (Ginsberg 1008)

This is no coincidence then that Armageddon is a reference to a well-known biblical prophesied battle between good and evil, and that Gog and Magog—respectively an individual and a place considered as enemies of “the people of God to appear at the end of the historical process” in the Bible (Railton 23)—is also a prophecy for the end of days. It should be noted that this religious and apocalyptic vocabulary is also at play in Corso’s “Bomb”, as Christine Hoff Kraemer rightfully analyzed in her essay (Kraemer Hoff 229). Moreover, Gog and Magog, “the forerunners of the Last Judgment” (Foster Damon 162) are to be destroyed in a biblical fire (162). “Gog and Magog” slowing evolving into a condensed “Gog Magog” in Ginsberg’s poem can also be a reference to an undivided entity named Gogmagog, a giant from the Albion (162). This, of course, reminds us of William Blake’s own depiction of Gog and Magog in his own

⁷ Emphasis mine.

poetical prophecies, gathered in what is called William Blake's prophetic books. By the end of "Jerusalem", Blake mentioned directly his own personal mythopoeic vision of Gog and Magog:

"Where are the Kingdoms of the World & all their glory that grew on desolation,
The fruit of Albion's Poverty Tree, when the Triple Headed GogMagog Giant
Of Albion Taxed the Nations into Desolation & then gave the Spectrous Oath"
(Blake 746)

Then again, "GogMagog" appears to be the bearer of destruction and "desolation"—and knowing the lasting influence of William Blake on Allen Ginsberg's life and poetical erudition,⁸ such an intertextual reference tends to insist on the timelessness of the message. This particular poetic construction, both in sound and meaning implies two things. First, it underlines the reality of the conflicts and erases the frontiers between poetry and reality, poetical prophecies and modern politics, which is emphasized not only by the overall war sounds of the poem or the tone of Ginsberg's reading, but also by actual mentions of Saddam Hussein and George H. W. Bush in the second part of the poem, making them part of an anti-war poem for both the sounds of their names and their political embodiments:

Saddam said he hadda bomb!
Bush said he better bomb!
Saddam said he hadda bomb!
Bush said he better bomb! (Ginsberg 1007)

Allen Ginsberg's imaginative creation is thus here a symbol of real wars. Not only does Ginsberg use political leaders as poetic tools to explore the sounds of their names and to underline in the same gesture their responsibilities towards the world as well as the absurdity and danger of such a concentration of destructive powers, but he also placed them on the same apocalyptic level of annihilation with biblical prophecies, blurring the frontier with reality, calling to the readers' and audience's imagination and thus increasing the impact of his messages. Then, it also shows that, as a poet, Allen Ginsberg considered that he had a responsibility (as Hussein and Bush had) regarding wars. To that extent, it is worth noting that Allen Ginsberg's own name appears at the end of the poem, where the incantatory question "who wanted a bomb?" is partially answered:

⁸ For more on this topic see: Ferrere, Alexandre. "Visions, Symbols and Intertextuality: An Overview of William Blake's Influence on Allen Ginsberg". *Empty Mirror* (2019) <https://www.emptymirrorbooks.com/literature/william-blake-influence-allen-ginsberg>.

Ginsberg says Gog & Magog

Armageddon did the job. (Ginsberg 1008)

In fact, by including the sounds of his name, as well as Hussein's and Bush's, the poet composed a poetic structure in which names are real incarnations of wars and palpable figures; whether it be Allen Ginsberg denouncing wars or Hussein and Bush making it, they are all taking part in them, their own names being symbolically at the core of the horrors. Those last two lines also introduce the poet in the tradition of the prophetic bard warning the rest of the world, trying to convince us through the power of sounds—and also positioning Ginsberg back in the primitive realm of oral poetry. While this posture of Ginsberg as a poet-prophet is not new in his career, he directly experimented this position when he chose to read this poem during one particular American moment: the ceremonial first pitch of a baseball game. Indeed, invited in 1994 by the Giants to read a poem and throw out the first pitch, Ginsberg delivered his “Hum Bom!” in front of an unusual audience of nearly 30,000 baseball fans. And just like Corso had experienced with his “Bomb”, Ginsberg was booed the entire performance—before throwing a “perfect, bounceless first ball” (Miller). Ginsberg told a reporter that he had chosen to read this specific poem for this particular occasion “because it is a sound poem that would echo properly through the stadium and penetrate everybody's skulls” (Miller), underlining his public mission as a poet-prophet.

To a certain extent, Gregory Corso's and Allen Ginsberg's poems can be seen as complementary: while one stresses the visual display of words on the page, the other focuses on the penetrative sound for the ear; Gregory Corso sculpted the page in order to graphically impact the reading process, while Allen Ginsberg gave to words a powerful sound incarnation to evoke wars—giving shape and sounds to ideas. But while both poems are bomb-themed and both of their authors share the same so-called “Beat” label, their poetic and semantical conceptions are very different and unfold in almost opposite directions. Corso's poem, indeed, embraces self-annihilation as part of mankind and contemplates death as an omnipresent, inevitable reality, no matter the form it takes and therefore inverting the usual view on such a process. In that sense, the shape of the bomb acts like a visual shock for the reader and the poem is built from fragment of words, absurd juxtapositions and layers of confusion, reinforcing in

return the very shape of the poem and establishing the bomb as a complex postmodern symbol.⁹ On the contrary, Ginsberg's poem is an overtly politically-engaged sound pamphlet. And while Corso's "bomb" "den[ies] the agents of destruction both credit and responsibility" as Michael Skau pointed (1999, 131), "Hum Bom!" is a hypnotic, aggressive and sonorous poem denouncing the powerful men of the world who are able to annihilate life in a few seconds. More than that, Ginsberg placed himself in a bardic tradition, the poet who knows and who warns us about the madness of times. In that sense, the poem's sound variations are working on multiple levels: getting into the heads of the audience with catchy rhythms and an overflow of assonances and alliterations, hammering the ultimate danger of the bomb by imitating war sounds and involving personal responsibilities—both political leaders' and citizens'. In other words, this is an omnidirectional preach addressed to the world, figuratively and literally, asking us to take actions to fight against a global threat. Nevertheless, both poets highlighted an omnipresent component of modern society in their poems and introduce their audience to what constitute a new paradigm in a warfare era: embrace it, or fight it.

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⁹ For more on this topic, see: Kraemer Hoff, Christine. "The Brake of Time: Corso's Bom as Postmodern God(dess)". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Poetic Self and Public World in Three Poets (Summer 2002), pp. 221-229.

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