"Unfair Arguments with Existence": Ferlinghetti's One-Acts and the Modes of Beat Drama

Deborah R. Geis
DePauw University

The importance of live performance to the Beats is unquestioned: one need only imagine the electricity in the air at Ginsberg's first reading of "Howl" at the 6 Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955. But another facet of what we might call Beat performance culture that (although significant at the time) tends to be overlooked by current critics is the interest in drama, particularly avant-garde pieces developed in collaborative settings and performed in non-mainstream spaces. In New York, this would give rise to the off-off Broadway movement that became central to the development in the mid-1960s of such artists as Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes, Rochelle Owens, Rosalyn Drexler, and others. Both Hettie Jones and Diana di Prima speak in their memoirs about how acting and doing design work for some of these small productions—what Jones calls "new plays in new nook-and-cranny theaters" (34)—became a way of forging a place among their fellow artists. Di Prima writes about how, in those heady early days, "while we were there, while the play was going on, we were outside of space and time, in a world which transcended natural law" (145). And of course, Le Roi Jones's play *Dutchman* was a controversial and pivotal piece for public discussion about race. Interestingly, though, we hear little about similar theatrical experiments among the Beats in San Francisco. Best known for both his own poetry and his support of other Beat writers as the co-founder, with Peter D. Martin, of City Lights Books in San Francisco in 1953—as well as for his early "jazz poetry" performances (Kenneth Rexroth said that he and Ferlinghetti were the ones who started this trend [Theado 87])—Lawrence Ferlinghetti also ventured at times into playwriting. His

avant-garde one-acts have been published in two collections, *Unfair Arguments with Existence* (New Directions, 1963) and in *Routines* (also New Directions, 1964); my discussion here will refer to the plays in the former and better-known collection.

It would be tempting to assume on the surface that these works are "closet dramas"—i.e., plays meant to be read but not performed—and in a different time and place, this may have been true. Ferlinghetti comments in his "Notes on the Plays" that they were written "nowhere near a stage," but he then adds: "Yet they seem to me very theatrical, in the best & worst sense" (vii). On the one hand, the pieces, like many of those by Ferlinghetti's earlier Dadaist and Surrealist European brethren, indeed often seem to be unstageable: it requires a leap of imagination to embody Shooky, the six-foot alligator character in *The Alligation*, or the crashing light bulbs at the end of *The Victims of Amnesia*, and the monologue of *The Customs Collector in Baggy Pants* makes no effort to embrace or seduce its audience. Reflective of the Beats' willingness to take artistic risks, then, is the fact that most of Ferlinghetti's short dramas were, indeed, staged: *The Alligation*, for example, at the San Francisco Poetry Festival in June 1962 (directed by Lee Breuer of later Mabou Mines fame) and again in November and December of that year at The Hamlet in Houston; *The Customs Colletor in Baggy Pants* by the R.G. Davis Mime Troupe in San Francisco and later by Warren Finnerty in New York "circa 1965" (ix).

In his plays, Ferlinghetti is clearly indebted to the French avant-garde and surrealist dramatists whose own theatrical experiments were so critical a few decades earlier. In Tristan Tzara's 1920 play *The Gas Heart*, the characters are "Eye, Mouth, Nose, Ear, Neck, and Eyebrow" (132). These figures intersperse a running commentary about how "The conversation is lagging, isn't it?" (133) with chorally configured lists and arguments, along with images that celebrate their own disembodiedness; at one point, Ear says, for example, "I'm running toward

happiness / I'm burning in the eyes of passing days / I swallow jewels / I sing in courtyards / love has not court nor hunting horn to fish up / hard-boiled egg hearts with" (134). In the first of Andre Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, he emphasizes the importance of spontaneous speech as a literary equivalent of the psychoanalytic unveiling of the unconscious (Benedikt xxiii). And perhaps most significantly, Antonin Artaud's manifestoes for a "Theatre of Cruelty" as well as his 1927 play *Jet of Blood* called for theatre to be pure emotion, an uninhibited and unabashedly violent form of expression: "It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed to its limits, that the theatre must be built" (qtd. in Benedikt xxviii).

In some instances, Ferlinghetti's acknowledgment of his Dadaist and surrealist predecessors is an explicit one. In particular, he mentions an indebtedness to Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" manifestoes, though he adds, "I don't love his madness" (ix). Furthermore, he explains that his play *The Victims of Amnesia* came about after reading two passages in Andre Breton's *Najda*. The first one was, "She enjoyed imagining herself a butterfly whose body consisted of a Mazda (Najda) bulb toward which rose a charmed snake (and now I am invariably disturbed when I pass the luminous Mazda sign on the main boulevards)" (viii). And the second one was, "a man comes into a hotel one day and asks to rent a room. He is shown up to number 35. As he comes down a few minutes later and leaves the key at the desk, he says: 'Excuse me, I have no memory at all. If you please, each time I come in, I'll tell you my name: Monsieur Delouit. And each time you'll tell me the number of my room . . . Soon afterwards, he returns, and as he passes the desk says: 'Monsieur Delouit.'—'Number 35, Monsieur.'—'Thank you.' A minute later, a man extraordinarily upset, his clothes covered with mud, bleeding, his face almost not a face at all, appears at the desk: 'Monsieur Delouit.'—'What do you mean, Monsieur

Delouit?. . . Monsieur Delouit has just gone upstairs!'—'I'm sorry, it's me . . . I've just fallen out of the window . . .'" (viii).

After Ferlinghetti delivers this lengthy quotation from Breton, he claims that the resemblance to his own *Victims of Amnesia* ends there, but this is a bit disingenuous. In his play, a night clerk at a transient hotel checks in a woman named Marie, who is wearing an "elegant maternity dress" (39), and they haggle over the language on the registry form. As in Breton's story, she tells him she has no memory, and comes back downstairs to ask for her room number a second time. In the second scene, alone in her room, Marie gives birth—not to a baby, but to a giant light bulb, which she lowers out the window, followed by the same action with a medium and then a small light bulb; Ferlinghetti notes that this scene "must be played with intensity, in a classic tragic manner, absolutely straight, not in any way to suggest comic overtones" (45). And in the final scene, a Young Woman (who may or may not be played by the same actress) comes into the hotel and claims that she is Marie and has just fallen out the window; this is followed by a twelve year old girl (again, possibly played by the same actress) who comes in and asks for the room number, then finally a Baby whose syllables of "Dada" and "Nada" obviously have other resonances. The clerk at this point is at his wit's end. He shakes his fist at the audience, saying, "All of you! With your blind feet! Taking you who knows where! Like as if any of you even knew what brung you in here! Incomprehensible transients! Inscrutable wanderers! Victims of amnesia!"(53). With this, he starts up the stairs with the baby and a rifle, telling everyone to drop dead. The play ends with a haunting and surreal closing image: "*A medium-size light bulb is thrown down the stairwell and breaks on stage. Then a large bulb. Then an enormous bulb. As each bulb crashes, louder than the preceding one, the light on the stage is diminished, the last crash leaving all in darkness; no more feet pass at the windows. Clock tolls endlessly in the*

darkness. Train whistles far off. In the darkness a very small light bulb is lowered very slowly and hesitantly down the stairwell. It grows brighter and brighter as the houselights come up" (55).

The light bulbs are grotesque births, but they are also ideas, brought forth or birthed into a world that is merely a way station, a home for transients—and mothered by someone in a state of repressed consciousness or forgetting. Like Breton, Ferlinghetti uses both cyclicity and transformation, both of which clearly have mythological and archetypal resonances, to show the anger and alienation in the artist's struggle; it's not too much of a stretch of the imagination to consider how this would be an attractive theme for a Beat writer. More than that, Ferlinghetti recognizes along with Artaud that the violence of an unspeakable or unstageable moment, as well as an assault upon the senses, shakes audience members out of their complacency and forces them to interact with what they have seen. In this play, we have the loud crashing of the light bulbs, the "endless" tolling of the clock, the train whistling, and the probably maddening image of the light bulb being lowered ever so slowly and brightening as the houselights come up. His other plays often end in such Artaudian moments. In the conclusion of *Three Thousand Red Ants*, we hear an alarm ringing that grows from a "whisper" to a "shout" (18). And *Alligation* ends with "[g]reat vines and leaves" that have "completely filled the doorway" (35), then a strobe light in which we see the alligator raping Ladybird; the Blind Indian cries out to the audience for help while the "TV flickers on in the darkness" (36). Even the relentlessness of the monologue that comprises *The Customs Collector in Baggy Pants* might be said to be an Artaudian act of theatrical aggression. While a poet like Bob Kaufman, who is also clearly interested in surrealism, uses it for the juxtaposition of incongruous visual images, Ferlinghetti's plays draw more forcefully upon the Dadaists' and Surrealists' notion of serious play, in which flagrantly

absurd and even untheatrical stagings speak to an increasingly alienating and disturbing universe. This is a universe that calls for "no more masterpieces," to use Artaud's famous cry (74), for a destruction of the commonplaces and banalities of conventional culture.

Since Ferlinghetti—along with Rexroth, Ginsberg, and others—was one of the initiators of what we would now call performance poetry, it is also worthwhile looking at the connections between his short plays and his contemporaneous body of poetical work. Famously, for example, when Ferlinghetti's dog Homer urinated on a cop, the poem "Dog" was the result; Ann Charters remarks that it was "conceived for jazz accompaniment as a spontaneously spoken 'oral message' rather than as a poem written for the printed page" (245). The word that resonates throughout "Dog" is "reality": "the things he sees / are bigger than himself [later, this becomes "smaller than himself"] / and the things he sees / are his reality" (113); also, the dog is "a real realist / with a real tale to tell / and a real tail to tell it with / a real live / barking / democratic dog" (114). It's not necessary to belabor the obvious and wonderful image of the dog as the ultimate roving beatnik creature and artist, one who wanders freely through the world and creates his own reality from it in defiance of conventions: "he will not be muzzled" (114). For our purposes here, though, it's even more interesting to see a similar vein running through Ferlinghetti's plays.

In *The Alligation*, a play whose punning title riffs off of both the title character of the alligator and the idea of what Ferlingetti calls "any connexion, situation, relationship obsession, habit, or other hang-up which is almost impossible to break" (20), Shooky the alligator is kept, figuratively, on a short leash by his owner, Ladybird. Visits from the Blind Indian, a very Pinterian character, warn her to let him go free: "You say How, you mean How keep alligator pet, How keep alligator baby, How not let grow, How not let free—How keep everything same!

How not change, how not see, how not hear small voice—" (33). In both "Dog" and *The Alligation*, to confine a creature is to silence the "small" voice that protests dominant discourse, that urges us to reperceive "reality" and create it anew. "Dog" ends with its subject as a kind of oracular speaker, imaged as the Victor Records dog "looking / like a living questionmark / into the / great gramophone / of puzzling existence / which always seems / just about to spout forth / some Victorious answer to everything" (115). But the end of *The Alligation*, as mentioned earlier, goes terribly wrong, with the alligator raping Ladybird and the Blind Indian crying out for help; here, the attempt to suppress the wild ends up in a kind of apocalyptic counter-violence.

Another poem from Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind*, "Constantly Risking Absurdity. . . ", is a sort of *ars poetica* that imagines the poet or creator as a high-wire circus act: "Constantly risking absurdity / and death / whenever he performs / above the heads / of his audience / the poet like an acrobat / climbs on rime / to a high wire of his own making" (96); later, "For he's the super realist / who must perforce perceive / taut truth [with an obvious pun here of 'taut' and 'taught'] / before the taking of each stance or step" (96). Again, the Beat artist is a risk-taker, but one who consciously takes those risks as part of the performance before an audience; his version of reality is a "super" reality that is somehow larger than life, or more real than what is conventionally seen as real.

We might look at the play *Three Thousand Red Ants*, with its Daliesque title, as a parallel piece in many ways. Ferlinghetti calls it "a little parable of the crack in anybody's egg or universe, through the looking glass—ontology at its most simple-minded" (vii). The piece is a very simple one: two characters, Fat and Moth (whose names are meant to be shortened versions of Father and Mother, but these shortened appellations call up direct visual images as well), are lying naked in a "great big bed almost anyplace by the sea" (3). When Fat finds an ant from their

cupboard within the pages of Moth's book, it leads to an existential argument about the relationship between the great and the small; Fat accuses Moth of caring more about her dropped egg-cup than about the "three thousand troops in Red China that just got drowned in the floods" (7). At the end of the play, they use binoculars to watch (or pretend to watch; the difference is immaterial here) parachutes descend from a plane towards the survivors of a shipwreck; they feel the emptiness of the universe yet also imagine that through the binoculars, they can see "[k]ind of a—crack in the ice, sort of—Through which to see—into eternity maybe" (18).

Perception, as in "Constantly Risking Absurdity," means stretching the truth and making it "taut." It means taking leaps through space and time (the high-wire acrobat, the parachutist); it means achieving a breathtaking act of balance—between the high and the low, the great and the small, and understanding their relationships. And perhaps the most telling passage in *Three Thousand Red Ants* comes when Fat says that they "Make up [their] identities as we go along, on demand, as needed. Improvised names and faces! Improvised characters!" Moth responds, "Behold the improvised philosopher!" as she turns away from him and closes her eyes. Fat remarks, "Improvisational Philosophy. . . We're all in a gutter . . . Improvising each step, to balance, counterbalance, to keep our balance—before we drop off, and disappear!" (5-6). Whether in the gutter or on a high-wire trapeze, the balancing act described here requires a certain kind of daredevildom, a certain performative elan—yet it also entails a willingness to negotiate with whatever appears before one in space at any given moment—and here we see the "taut truth" of the Beat poet or in this case the Beat playwright as well.

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