Allen Ginsberg

Irwin Allen Ginsberg ([June 3, 1926 - April 5, 1997]) was an American poet, philosopher and writer. He is considered one of the leading figures of both the Beat Generation during the 1950s and the counterculture that soon followed. He vigorously opposed militarism, economic materialism and sexual repression and was known as embodying various aspects of this counterculture, such as his views on drugs, hostility to bureaucracy and openness to Eastern religions. He was one of many influential American writers of his time known as the Beat Generation, which included famous writers such as Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs.

Ginsberg is best known for his poem *Howl*, in which he denounced what he saw as the destructive forces of capitalism and conformity in the United States. In 1956, "Howl" was seized by San Francisco police and US Customs. In 1957, it attracted widespread publicity when it became the subject of an obscenity trial, as it described heterosexual and homosexual sex at a time when sodomy laws made homosexual acts a crime in every U.S. state. "Howl" reflected Ginsberg's own homosexuality and his relationships with a number of men, including Peter Orlovsky, his lifelong partner. Judge Clifton W. Horn ruled that "Howl" was not obscene, adding, "Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemisms?"

Ginsberg was a practicing Buddhist who studied Eastern religious disciplines extensively. He lived modestly, buying his clothing in second-hand stores and residing in downtown apartments in New York's East Village. One of his most influential teachers was the Buddhist Tibetan Chögyam Trungpa, the founder of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. At Trungpa's urging, Ginsberg and poet Anne Waldman started The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics there in 1974.

Ginsberg took part in decades of non-violent political protest against everything from the Vietnam War to the War on Drugs. His poem "September on Jessore Road", calling attention to the plight of Bangladeshi refugees, exemplifies what the literary critic Helen Vendler described as Ginsberg's tireless persistence in protesting against "imperial politics, and persecution of the powerless."

His collection The Fall of America shared the annual U.S. National Book Award for Poetry in 1974. In 1979 he received the National Arts Club Gold medal and was inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Ginsberg was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1995 for his book Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems 1986-1992.

Biography

Early life and family

Ginsberg was born into a Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey, and grew up in nearby Paterson. As a young teenager, Ginsberg began to write letters to The New York Times about political issues, such as World War II and workers' rights. While in high school, Ginsberg began reading Walt Whitman, inspired by his teacher's passionate reading.

In 1943, Ginsberg graduated from Eastside High School and briefly attended Montclair State College before entering Columbia University on a scholarship from the Young Men's Hebrew Association of Paterson. In 1945, he joined the Merchant Marine to earn money to continue his education at Columbia. While at Columbia, Ginsberg contributed to the Columbia Review literary journal, the Jester humor magazine, won the Woody Guthrie Poetry Prize, served as president of the Philodelsic Society (literary and debate group), and joined Bear's Head Society (poetry society). Ginsberg has stated that he considered his required freshman seminar in Great Books, taught by Lionel Trilling, to be his favorite Columbia course.

According to The Poetry Foundation, Ginsberg spent several months in a mental institution after he pleaded insanity during a hearing. He was being prosecuted for harboring stolen goods in his dorm room. It was noted that the stolen property was not his, but belonged to an acquaintance.

Relationship with his parents

Ginsberg referred to his parents, in a 1985 interview, as "old-fashioned delicatessen philosophers". His father, Louis Ginsberg, was a published poet and a high school teacher. Ginsberg's mother, Naomi Liverant Ginsberg, was affected by a psychological illness that was never properly diagnosed. She was also an active member of the Communist Party and took Ginsberg and his brother Eugene to party meetings. Ginsberg later said that his mother "made up bedtime stories that all went something like: 'The good king rode forth from his castle, saw the suffering workers and healed them.'" Of his father Ginsberg said "My father would go around the house either reciting Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg (1894-1956) or Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg (1894-1956)," his long autobiographical poem for his father's memory.

When he was in junior high school, he accompanied his mother's father by bus to her therapist. Ginsberg later said that his mother "made up bedtime stories that all went something like: 'The good king rode forth from his castle, saw the suffering workers and healed them.'"

Naomi Ginsberg's mental illness often manifested as paranoid delusions. She would claim, for example, that the president had implanted listening devices in their home and that her mother-in-law was trying to kill her. Her suspicion of those around her caused Naomi to draw closer to young Allen, "her little pet," as Bill Morgan says in his biography of Ginsberg, titled, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*. She also told him she would kill herself by slitting her wrists and was soon taken to Greystone, a mental hospital; she would spend much of Ginsberg's youth in mental hospitals. His experiences with his mother and her mental illness were a major inspiration for his two major works, "Howl" and his long autobiographical poem *Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg (1894-1956)*.

New York Beats

In 1955, Ginsberg attended a meeting of the Young Lords, a Communist Party affiliate, and began writing his first beat poem for the group, "Howl". The poem rapidly became a sensation, and Ginsberg quickly became a leader of the counterculture movement. He was soon joined by other poets, including William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso, who helped to define the Beat Generation.

Ginsberg's poetry was characterized by its anti-establishment themes and its rejection of traditional values. His most famous work, "Howl," is a powerful paean to the Beat Generation and its ideals of freedom and individualism. Ginsberg's poetry was often controversial, and he was involved in several legal battles over its publication. Despite this, he continued to write and to be a vocal champion of the Beats until his death in 1997.
Continuing literary activity in England and the International Poetry Incarnation to Paris and the “Beat Hotel”, Tangier and India.

San Francisco Renaissance

Blake vision and Join the Dance

Later in his life, Ginsberg formed a bridge between the beat movement of the 1950s and the 1960s. The Beat Generation is known for its focus on individualism, non-conformity, and a rejection of mainstream values. Ginsberg, along with other Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, sought to recapture a sense of spirituality and communal experience that they believed had been lost in modern society. Through his association with Elise Cowen, Ginsberg discovered that they shared a mutual friend, Carl Solomon, to whom he later dedicated his most famous poem “Howl”. This poem is considered an autobiography of Ginsberg up to 1955, and a brief history of the Beat Generation through its references to his relationship to other Beat artists of that time.

“Blake vision”

In 1948 in an apartment in Harlem, Ginsberg had an auditory hallucination while reading the poetry of William Blake. Later referred to as his “Blake vision”. At first, Ginsberg claimed to have heard the voice of God, but later interpreted the voice as that of Blake himself. “Howl” was described by Ginsberg as the “voice of the ancient of days”. The experience lasted several days. Ginsberg had noticed that he had witnessed the interconnectedness of the universe. He looked at latticework on the fire escape and realized some hand had crafted it. He reached the sky and intuited that something had been created, that it was the hand that had crafted it.

This hallucination was not inspired by drug use, but it was not felt that later with various drugs. Ginsberg stated “living blue hand of God. Or that God was in front of my eyes, existence itself was God,” and “it was a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe than I’d been existing in.”

San Francisco Renaissance

Ginsberg moved to San Francisco in 1953. During his time in San Francisco, he organized poetry readings at the Six Gallery. The event, in essence, brought together the East and West Coast factions of the Beat Generation. Ginsberg’s mentor William Carlos Williams wrote an introductory letter to San Francisco Renaissance figurehead Kenneth Rexroth, who then introduced Ginsberg into the San Francisco poetry scene. There, Ginsberg also met three budding poets and Zen enthusiasts who had become friends at Reed College: Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Lew Welch. In 1959, along with poets John Kelly, Bob Kaufman, A. D. Winans, and William Margolis, Ginsberg was one of the founders of the Beatitudes poetry magazine.

Biographical references in “Howl”

The poem “Howl” is known for its inclusivity and the list of people mentioned. Many of the names are real individuals. Ginsberg once said of the poem, “I was trying to get a sense of the modern world and the modern man.”

Biographical references outside of “Howl”

Ginsberg’s principal work, “Howl”, is well known for its opening line: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked…” “Howl” was considered scandalous at the time of its publication, because of the rawness of its language. Shortly after its 1956 publication by San Francisco’s City Lights Bookshop, it was banned for obscenity. The ban became a cause célèbre among defenders of the First Amendment, and was later lifted, after Judge Clayton W. Horn declared the poem’s poor redeeming artistic value. Ginsberg and Ish Murao, the City Lights manager who was jailed for selling “Howl”, became lifelong friends.

Letter to Ginsberg on a sheet of toilet paper. Through a party organized by Amiri Baraka, Ginsberg was introduced to Robert Creeley or Burroughs might also apply, but both writers later strove to disassociate themselves from the name “Beat Generation.” Part of their dissatisfaction with the term came from the mistaken identification of Ginsberg as the leader. Ginsberg never claimed to be the leader of a movement. He claimed that many of the writers with whom he had become friends in this period shared many of the same intentions and themes. Some of these friends include: David Amram, Bob Kaufman, Diane di Prima, Jim Cohn; poets associated with the Black Mountain College; such as Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov; poets associated with the New York School such as Frank O’Hara and Kenneth Koch; LeRoi Jones before he became Amiri Baraka, who, after reading “Howl”, wrote a letter to Ginsberg on a sheet of toilet paper. Through a party organized by Amiri Baraka, Ginsberg was introduced to Langston Hughes while Ornette Coleman played saxophone.

Later in his life, Ginsberg formed a bridge between the beat movement of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s, befriending, among others, Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, and Bob Dylan.
Buddhism and Krishnaisrn

In 1950, Kerouac began studying Buddhism and shared what he learned from Dwight Goddard’s *Buddhist Bible* with Ginsberg. Ginsberg first heard about the Four Noble Truths and such sutras as the *Diamond Sutra* at this time.

Ginsberg’s spiritual journey began early on with his spontaneous visions, and continued with an early trip to India with Gary Snyder. Snyder had previously spent time in Kyoto to study at the First Zen Institute at Daikojuji Monastery. At one point, Snyder chanted the *Prajnaparamita*, which in Ginsberg’s words “blew my mind.” His interest piqued, Ginsberg traveled to meet the Dalai Lama as well as the Karmapa at Rumtek Monastery. Continuing on his journey, Ginsberg met Dudjom Rinpoche in Kalimpong, who taught him: “if you see something horrible, don’t cling to it, and if you see something beautiful, don’t cling to it.”

Upon returning to the United States, a chance encounter on a New York City street with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (they both tried to catch the same cab), a Kagu and Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist master, led to Trungpa becoming his friend and lifelong teacher. Ginsberg helped Trungpa and New York poet Anne Waldman in founding the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

Ginsberg was also involved with Krishnaisrn. He had started incorporating chanting the *Hare Krishna mantra* into his religious practice in the mid-1960s. After learning that A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the *Hare Krishna* movement in the Western world had rented a store front in New York, he befriended him, visiting him often and suggesting publishers for his books, and a fruitful relationship began. This relationship is documented by *Saharavanga dasa Cowsamy* in his biographical account *SitaPrabhupada Lilamrta*. Ginsberg donated money, materials, and his reputation to help the Swami establish the first temple, and toured with him to promote his cause.

Despite disagreeing with many of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s required prohibitions, Ginsberg often sang the Hare Krishna mantra publicly as part of his philosophy and declared that it brought a state of ecstasy. He was glad that Bhaktivedanta Swami, an authentic *swami* from India, was now trying to spread chanting in America. Along with other counterculture idealogues like Timothy Leary, Gary Snyder, and Alan Watts, Ginsberg hoped to incorporate Bhaktivedanta Swami into his chanting into the hippie movement, and agreed to take part in the Mantra-Rock Dance concert and to introduce the swami to the Hasya-Ashtuplyi hippie community.

On January 16, 1967, Ginsberg helped plan and organize a reception for Bhaktivedanta Swami at San Francisco International Airport where fifty to a hundred hippies greeted the swami, chanting Hare Krishna in the airport lounge with flowers in hands. To further support and promote Bhaktivedanta Swami’s message and chanting in San Francisco, Ginsberg agreed to attend the Mantra-Rock Dance, a musical event 1967 held at the Avalon Ballroom by the San Francisco Hare Krishna temple. It featured some leading rock bands of the time: Big Brother and the Holding Company with Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, and Moby Grape, who performed there along with the Hare Krishna founder Bhaktivedanta Swami and donated proceeds to the Krishna temple. Ginsberg introduced Bhaktivedanta Swami to some three thousand hippies in the audience and led the chanting of the *Hare Krishna mantra*.

Music and chanting were both important parts of Ginsberg’s live delivery during poetry readings. He often accompanied himself on a harmonium, and it was often accompanied by a guitarist. It is believed that the Hindu and Buddhist poet Nagari had introduced Ginsberg to the harmonium in Banaras. According to Malay Roy Choudhury, Ginsberg refined his practice while learning from his relatives, including his cousin Savitri Banerjee. When Ginsberg asked if he could sing a love song in praise of Lord Krishna on William C. Buckley, Jr.’s TV show *Firing Line* on September 3, 1968, Buckley acceded and the poet chanted slowly as he played dully on a harmonium. According to William Brookhiser, an associate of Buckley’s, the host commentated that it was “one of the unhappiest Krishna I’ve ever heard.”

At the 1967 Human Be-In in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and the 1970 Black Panther rally at Yale campus Allen chanted “Om” repeatedly over a sound system for hours on end.

Ginsberg further brought mantras into the world of rock and roll when he recited the Heart Sutra in the song “Ghetto Defendant.” The song appears on the 1982 album *Combat Rock* by British first wave punk band The Clash.

Ginsberg came in touch with the *Hungry poets* group of Bengal, especially Malay Roy Choudhury, who introduced Ginsberg to the three fishes with head of Indian emperor Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar. The three fishes symbolised coexistence of all thought, philosophy and religion.

In spite of Ginsberg’s attraction to Eastern religions, the journalist Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar argues that he, like Whitman, adhered to an “American brand of mysticism” that was “rooted in humanism and in a romantic and visionary ideal of harmony among men.”

Illness and death

In 1960, he was treated for a tropical disease, and it is speculated that he contracted hepatitis from an unsterilized needle administered by a doctor, which played a role in his death 37 years later. Ginsberg was a lifelong smoker, and though he tried to quit for health and religious reasons, his busy schedule in later life made it difficult, and he always returned to smoking.

In the 1970s, Ginsberg suffered two minor strokes which were first diagnosed as *Bell’s palsy*, which gave him significant paralysis and stroke-like drooping of the muscles in one side of his face. Later in life, he also suffered constant minor ailments such as high blood pressure. Many of these symptoms were related to stress, but he never slowed down his schedule.

Ginsberg won a 1974 *National Book Award for The Fall of America* (split with Adrienne Rich), *Divining into the Wheel*. In 1986, Ginsberg was awarded the Golden Wreath by the Strug Poerty Poetry International Festival in Macedonia, the second American poet to be so awarded since W. H. Auden. At Struga, he met with the other Golden Wreath winners Bulat Okudzhava and Andrei Voznesensky. In 1993, the French Minister of Culture made him a *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres*.

Ginsberg continued to help his friends as much as he could, so going far as to give money to Herbert Huncke, cut off from his own pocket, housing a broke and drug addicted Harry Smith.

With the exception of a special guest appearance at the *NVU* Poetry Slam on February 20, 1997, Ginsberg gave what is thought to be his last reading at The Booksmith in San Francisco on December 16, 1996.

After returning home from the hospital for the last time, where he had been unsuccessfully treated for congestive heart failure, Ginsberg continued making phone calls to say goodbye to nearly everyone in his addressbook. Some of the phone calls, including one with Johnny Depp, were sad and interrupted by crying, and others were joyful and optimistic. Ginsberg continued to write through his final illness, with his last poem, “Things I’ll Not Do (Nostalgias)” written on March 30.

He died surrounded by family and friends in his East Village loft in New York City, succumbing to liver cancer via complications of hepatitis. He was 70 years old.

Gregory Corso, Roy Lichtenstein, Patti Smith, and others came by to pay their respects.

One third of Ginsberg’s ashes were buried in his family plot in Gomel Chesed Cemetery in Newark, NJ. He was survived by Orlovsky.

When Orlovsky died, as per Ginsberg’s wishes, another third of his ashes were buried alongside Orlovsky at Shambhala Mountain Center in Colorado. The remaining third of the ashes are buried at Jewel Heart, Geku Rimpoches, sangha, in India.

In 1998, various writers, including Catfish McFarlin read at a gathering at Ginsberg’s farm to honor Allen and the beatniks.

Social and political activism

Free speech

Ginsberg’s willingness to talk about taboo subjects made him a controversial figure during the conservative 1950s, and a significant figure in the 1960s. In the mid-1950s, no reputable publishing company would even consider publishing “Howl.” At the time, such “sex talk” employed in “Howl” was considered by some to be vulgar or even a form of pornography, and could be prosecuted under law. Ginsberg used sex-related terms such as “cocksucker”, “fucked in the ass”, and “cunt” as part of the poem’s depiction of different aspects of American culture. Numerous books that discussed sex were banned at the time, including *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The sex that Ginsberg described did not portray the sex between heterosexual married couples, or even long time lovers. Instead, Ginsberg portrayed casual sex. For example, in “Howl”, Ginsberg praises the man “who sweetened the snatches of a million girls”. Ginsberg used gritty descriptions and explicit sexual language, pointing out the man “who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup.” In his poetry, Ginsberg also discussed the then-taboo topic of homosexuality. The explicit sexual language that filled “Howl” eventually led to an important trial on *First Amendment* issues. Ginsberg’s publisher was brought up on charges for publishing pornography, and the outcome led to a judge going on record dismissing charges, because the poem carried “redeeming social importance”, thus setting an important legal precedent. Ginsberg continued to broach controversial subjects throughout the 1970s, and 1980s, and...
Role in Vietnam War protests

Ginsberg was a signer of the anti-war manifesto "A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority," circulated among draft resisters in 1967 by members of the radical intellectual collective RESIST. Other signers and RESIST members included Mitchell Goodman, Henry Braun, Denise Levertov, Noam Chomsky, William Sloane Coffin, Dwight Macdonald, Robert Lowell, and Norman Mailer. In 1968, Ginsberg signed the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest," pledge, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War, and later became a sponsor of the War Tax Resistance project, which practiced and advocated tax resistance as a form of anti-war protest.

Bangladeshi war victims

Allen Ginsberg called attention to the suffering of victims during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. He wrote his legendary 152-line poem, September on Jessore Road after visiting refugee camps and witnessed the plight of millions fleeing the violence.

Ginsberg's poem also serves as an indictment of the United States:

Where are the helicopters of U.S. AID?
Smuggling dope in Bangkok's green shade.
Where is America's Air Force of Light?
Bombing North Laos all day and all night?

Out of the poem, he made a song that was performed by Bob Dylan, other musicians and Ginsberg himself.

The last few lines of the poem read:

Millions of babies in pain
Millions of mothers in rain
Millions of brothers in woe
Millions of children nowhere to go

Relationship to communism

Ginsberg talked openly about his connections with communism and his admiration for past communist heroes and the labor movement at a time when the Red Scare and McCarthyism were still raging. He admired Fidel Castro and many other quasi-Marxist figures from the 20th century. In America (1956), Ginsberg writes: "America, I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry." Biographer Jonathan Raskin has claimed that, despite his often stark opposition to communist orthodoxy, Ginsberg held "his own idiosyncratic version of communism". On the other hand, when Donald Marquis, a New York City politician, publicly accused Ginsberg of being a member of the Communist Party, Ginsberg objected: "I am not, as a matter of fact, a member of the Communist party, nor am I dedicated to the overthrow of the U.S. government or any government by violence. I must say that I see little difference between the armed and violent governments both Communist and Capitalist that I have observed".

Ginsberg travelled to several communist countries to promote free speech. He claimed that communist countries, such as China, welcomed him, because they thought he was an enemy of capitalism, but often turned against him when they saw him as a troublemaker. For example, in 1965 Ginsberg was deported from Burma: he said that when he first got to know Huncke in the 1940s, Ginsberg saw that he was sick from his heroin addiction, but at the time heroin was a taboo subject and Huncke was left with nowhere to go for help.

Demystification of drugs

Ginsberg talked often about drug use. He organized the New York City chapter of LeMar (Legalize Marijuana). Throughout the 1960s he took an active role in the demystification of LSD and, with Timothy Leary, worked to promote its common use. He remained for many decades an advocate of marijuana legalization, and, at the same time, warned his audiences against the hazards of tobacco in his Put Down Your Cigarette Rag (Don't Smoke): "Don't Smoke Don't Smoke Nicotine Nicotine No / No don't smoke the official Dope Smoke Dope Dope."
Inspiration from friends

Ginsberg claimed throughout his life that his biggest inspiration was Kerouac's concept of "spontaneous prose." He believed literature should come from the soul without conscious restrictions. Ginsberg was more much more prone to revive than Kerouac. For example, when Kerouac saw the first draft of "Howl" he disliked the fact that Ginsberg had made editorial changes in pencil (transposing "neggro" and "angry" in the first line, for example). Kerouac only wrote out his concepts of Spontaneous Prose at Ginsberg's insistence because Ginsberg wanted to learn how to apply the technique to his poetry.

The inspiration for "Howl" was Ginsberg's friend, Carl Solomon, and "Howl" is dedicated to him. Solomon was a DaDa and Surrealism enthusiast (he introduced Ginsberg to Artaud) who suffered bouts of clinical depression. Solomon wanted to commit suicide, but he thought a form of suicide appropriate to dadaism would be to go to a mental institution and demand a lobotomy. The institution refused, giving him many forms of therapy including electroshock therapy. Much of the final section of the first part of "Howl" is a description of this story.

Ginsberg used Solomon as an example of all those ground down by the machine of Moloch. Moloch, to whom the second section is addressed, is a Levantine god to whom children were sacrificed. Ginsberg may have gotten the name from the Kenneth Rexroth poem "Thou Shall Not Kill", a poem about the death of one of Ginsberg's heroes, Dylan Thomas. Moloch is mentioned a few times in the Torah and references to Ginsberg's Jewish background are frequent in his work. Ginsberg said the image of Moloch was inspired by peyote visions he had of the Francis Drake Hotel in San Francisco which appeared to him as a skull; he took it as a symbol of the city (not specifically San Francisco, but all cities). Ginsberg later acknowledged in various publications and interviews that behind the visions of the Francis Drake Hotel were memories of the Moloch of Fritz Lang's film Metropolis (1927) and of the woodcut novels of Lynd Ward. Moloch has subsequently been interpreted as any system of control, including the conformist society of post-World War II America, focused on material gain, which Ginsberg frequently blamed for the destruction of all those outside of societal norms.

He also made sure to emphasize that Moloch is a part of humanity in multiple aspects, in that the decision to defy socially created systems of control — and therefore against Moloch — is a form of self-destruction. Many of the characters Ginsberg references in "Howl", such as Neal Cassady and Herbert Huncke, destroyed themselves through excessive substance abuse or a generally wild lifestyle. The personal aspects of "Howl" are perhaps as important as the political aspects. Carl Solomon, the prime example of a "best mind" destroyed by defying society, is associated with Ginsberg's schizophrenic mother: the line "with mother finally fucked" comes after a long section about Carl Solomon, and in Part III, Ginsberg says: "I'm with you in Rockland where you imitate the shade of my mother." Ginsberg later admitted that the drive to write "Howl" was fueled by sympathy for his ailing mother, an issue which he was not yet ready to deal with. He dealt with it directly with 1959's "Kaddish", which had its first public reading at a Catholic Worker Friday Night meeting, possibly due to its associations with Thomas Merton.

Inspiration from mentors and idols

Ginsberg's poetry was strongly influenced by Modernism (most importantly the American style of Modernism pioneered by William Carlos Williams). Romanticism (specifically William Blake and John Keats), the beat and cadence of jazz (specifically that of top musicians such as Charlie Parker), and his Kagu Buddhist practice and Jewish background. He considered himself to have inherited the visionary poetic mantle handed down from the English poet and artist William Blake, the American poet Walt Whitman and the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca.

The power of Ginsberg's verse, its searching, probing focus, its long and lifting lines, as well as its New World exuberance, echo all the continuity of inspiration that he claimed.

He corresponded with William Carlos Williams, who was then in the middle of writing his epic poem Paterson about the industrial city near his home. After attending a reading by Williams, Ginsberg sent the older poet several of his poems and wrote an introductory letter. Most of these early poems were rhymed and metered and included archaic pronouns like "thee." Williams disliked the poems and told Ginsberg, "In this mode perfection is basic, and these poems are not perfect."

Though he disputed these early poems, Williams loved the exuberance in Ginsberg's letter. He included the letter in a later part of Paterson. He encouraged Ginsberg not to emulate the old masters, but to speak with his own voice and the voice of the common American. From Williams, Ginsberg learned to focus on strong visual images, in line with Williams' own motto "No ideas but in things." Studying Williams' style led to a tendency of Ginsberg from the early formalist work to a loose, colloquial free verse style. Early breakthrough poems include Bricklayer's Lunch Hour and Dream Record.

Carl Solomon introduced Ginsberg to the work of Antonin Artaud (To Have Done with the Judgement of God and Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society), and Jean Genet (Our Lady of the Flowers). Philip Lamantia introduced him to other Surrealists and Surrealism continued to be an influence (for example, sections of Kaddish were inspired by André Breton's Free Union). Ginsberg claimed the anaphoric repetition of "Howl" and other poems was inspired by Christopher Smart in such poems as Jubilate Agno. Ginsberg also claimed other more traditional influences, such as: Franz Kafka, Herman Melville, Theodore Dostoevsky, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickinson.

Ginsberg also did an intense study of haiku and the paintings of Paul Cézanne, from which he adapted a concept important to his work, which he called the Eyeball Kick. He noticed in viewing Cézanne's paintings that when the eye moved from one color to a contrasting color, the eye would poam or "kick." Likewise, he discovered that the contrast of two seeming opposites was a common feature in haiku. Ginsberg used this technique in his poetry, putting together two starkly dissimilar images: something weak with something strong, an artifact of high culture with an artifact of low culture, something holy with something unholy. The example Ginsberg most often used was "hydrogen jukebox" (which later became the title of a song cycle composed by Philip Glass with lyrics drawn from Ginsberg's poems). Another example is Ginsberg's observation on Bob Dylan during Dylan's hectic and intense 1966 electric-guitar tour, fuelled by a cocktail of amphetamines, opiates, alcohol, and psychedelics, as a Dazed and Confused Clown. The phrases "eyeball kick" and "hydrogen jukebox" both show up in "Howl", as well as a direct quote from Cézanne: "Pater Omnipotens Astrae Deus."

Inspiration from music

Allen Ginsberg also found inspiration in music. He frequently included music in his poetry, invariably composing his tunes on an old Indian harmonium, which he often played during his readings. Ginsberg also made an intense study of music to accompany William Blake's To Have Done with the Judgement of God and Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society, and Jean Genet (Our Lady of the Flowers) with lyrics drawn from Ginsberg's poems). Another example is Ginsberg's observation on Bob Dylan during Dylan's hectic and intense 1966 electric-guitar tour, fuelled by a cocktail of amphetamines, opiates, alcohol, and psychedelics, as a Dazed and Confused Clown. The phrases "eyeball kick" and "hydrogen jukebox" both show up in "Howl", as well as a direct quote from Cézanne: "Pater Omnipotens Astrae Deus."

Style and technique

From the study of his idols and mentors and the inspiration of his friends — not to mention his own experiments — Ginsberg developed an individualistic style that's easily identifiable as Ginsbergian. Ginsberg stated that Whitman's long line was a dynamic technique few other poets had ventured to develop further, and Whitman is also often compared to Ginsberg because their poetry sexualized aspects of the male form.

Many of Ginsberg's early line length experiments come in some sort of anaphora, repetition of a "fixed base" (for example who in "Howl", America in "America") and this has become a recognizable feature of Ginsberg's style. He said later this was a crutch he lacked confidence; he did not yet trust "free flight." In the 1960s, after employing it in some sections of "Kaddish" ("caw" for example) he, for the most part, abandoned the anaphoric form.

Several of his earlier experiments with methods for formatting poems as a whole became regular aspects of his style in later poems. In the original draft of "Howl," each line is in a stepped triadic format reminiscent of William Carlos Williams. However, he abandoned the "stepped triadic" when he developed his long line although the stepped lines showed up later, most significantly in the travellers of The Fall of America. "Howl" and "Kaddish", arguably his two most important poems, are both organized as an inverted pyramid, with larger sections leading to smaller sections. In America, he also experimented with a mix of longer and shorter lines.

In "Howl" and in his other poetry, Ginsberg drew inspiration from the epic, free verse style of the 19th-century American poet Walt Whitman. Both wrote passionately about the promise (and betrayal) of American democracy, the central importance of erotic experience, and the spiritual quest for the truth of everyday existence. J. D. McClatchy, editor of the Yale Review, called Ginsberg "the best-known American poet of his generation, as much a social force as a literary phenomenon." McClatchy added that Ginsberg, like Whitman, "was a Bard in the old manner — outcast, conman, trickster, answerer of riddles, part prayer, part rant. His work is finally a history of our era's psyche, with all its contradictory urges." McClatchy's barbed eulogies define the essential difference between Ginsberg ("a beat poet whose writing was ... journalism raised by combining the recycling genius with a generous mimic-empathy, to strike audience-accessible chords; always lyrical and sometimes truly poetic") and Kerouac ("a poet of singular brilliance, the brightest luminary of a 'beat generation' he came to symbolise in popular culture ... [though] in reality he far surpassed his contemporaries ... Kerouac is an originating genius, exploring then answering - like Rimbaud a century earlier, by necessity more than by choice - the demands of authentic self-expression as applied to the evolving quicksilver mind of America's only literary virtuoso ... ").

Bibliography

Further reading

Notes

See also

Resources

References

Further reading


**External links**

The Allen Ginsberg Trust

Works by or about Allen Ginsberg in libraries (WorldCat catalog)

Allen Ginsberg at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database


Case Histories: Allen Ginsberg at PEN.org honoring Ginsberg's work, from PEN American Center

Allen Ginsberg on Poets.org. With audio clips, poems, and related essays, from the Academy of American Poets

Audio recordings of Allen Ginsberg, from the Woodberry Poetry Room, Harvard University

Audio recordings of Allen Ginsberg, from Maryland Institute College of Art's Decker Library, Internet Archive

"After 50 Years, Ginsberg's Howl Still Resonates" NPR October 27, 2006

Allen Ginsberg photographs with hand-written captions at LensCulture

Autobiographical Article in Shambhala Sun Magazine

Modern American Poetry, interview

Allen Ginsberg at Find a Grave

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Allen Ginsberg was among the chief American poets in the 1950s and 60s. His poem "Howl" proved to be great topic of debates and discussions. To know more about him, read his brief biography.