

Allen Ginsberg

was born in Newark, New Jersey, on June 3, 1926. He attended Columbia University in New York City, where he befriended Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Neal Cassady, and Herbert Huncke. Together, they initiated Ginsberg into a culture of drugs and petty crime. Following a high-speed car chase involving a stolen vehicle, stolen goods, and an innocent right on red, Ginsberg was arrested. In order to escape imprisonment, he pleaded insanity, resulting in an eight-month stay at Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute.

Put off by his own delinquent forays, Ginsberg briefly toyed with a conservative lifestyle: after his release, he pronounced himself heterosexual and joined an advertising company. Dissatisfied, he became a dishwasher, a night porter, and a spot-welder before finally rejoining his peers in San Francisco. With a letter of introduction from William Carlos Williams, he was quickly adopted by the West Coast poets and encouraged to publish his work.

In October 1955, he unofficially inaugurated the Beat movement with his thunderous performance of "Howl" at the now-legendary Six Gallery poetry reading. An obscenity trial publicized the poem, making Ginsberg a national symbol of illicit sexuality and political defiance. Over the years, he was repeatedly arrested for participating in various antiwar, drug legalization, and nuclear disarmament marches.

In 1974, Ginsberg won the National Book Award for *The Fall of America*. Later that year, he and poet Anne Waldman founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

With over fifteen volumes of poetry including *Howl* (1956), *Kaddish* (1961), *Reality Sandwiches* (1963), *The Fall of America* (1973), and *Plutonian Ode* (1982) and ten books of prose, including *The Yage Letters* (1963), *Allen Verbatim* (1974), *Chicago Trial Testimony* (1975), and *Straight Hearts' Delight* (1980), Ginsberg was the most prolific of the Beat writers. Until his death in April 1997, he remained the acknowledged ringleader of the Beats, appearing at poetry readings and multicultural events across the country.



Allen Ginsberg during a poetry reading at New York University, 1971.

Allen Ginsberg was elected King of the May by Czech students in Prague on May Day, 1965. Soon afterward, he was expelled by the Czech government. He had been traveling for several months—in Cuba, Russia, and Poland—and from Prague he flew to London to negotiate the English publication of his poems. I didn't know he was in the country, but one night in Bristol before a poetry reading I saw him in a bar. He read that night; I hadn't heard him read before and was struck that evening by the way he seemed to enter each of his poems emotionally while reading them, the performance as much a discovery for him as for his audience.

Ginsberg and I left Bristol that day after the reading and hitchhiked to Wells Cathedral and then to Glastonbury, where he picked a flower from King Arthur's grave to send, he said, to his lifelong companion, Peter Orlovsky. He carefully studied the exhibit of tools and weapons

under the huge canonical chimney of the ancient king's kitchen, as later in Cambridge he was to study the Fitzwilliam Museum's store of Blake manuscripts; Ginsberg's idea of a Jerusalemic Britain occurring now in the day of long hair and new music meant equally the fulfillment of Blake's predictions of Albion. As we came out of a tea shop in Glastonbury (where customers had glanced cautiously at the bearded, prophetic—and unfazed—stranger), Allen spoke of Life's simulacrum of a report of his Oxford encounter with Dame Edith Sitwell. ("Dope makes me come out all over in spots," she's supposed to have said.)

Leaving the town, we were caught in a rainstorm and took a bus to Bath. Then, hitchhiking toward London, we were unsuccessful until Ginsberg tried using Buddhist hand signals instead of thumbing; half a minute later a car stopped. Riding through Somerset he talked about notation, the mode he says he learned from Kerouac and has used in composing his enormous journals; he read from an account he'd made of a recent meeting with the poets Yevtushenko and Voznesensky in Moscow, and then, looking up at a knot in a withered oak by the road, said, "The tree has cancer of the breast . . . that's what I mean. . . ."

Two weeks later he was in Cambridge for a reading and I asked him to submit to this interview. He was still busy with Blake, roaming and musing around the university and countryside in his spare moments; it took two days to get him to sit still long enough to turn on the tape recorder. He spoke slowly and thoughtfully, tiring after two hours. We stopped for a meal when guests came—when Ginsberg learned one of them was a biochemist he questioned him about viruses and DNA for an hour—then we returned to record the other half of the tape.

. . .

INTERVIEWER: I think Diana Trilling, speaking about your reading at Columbia, remarked that your poetry, like all poetry in English when dealing with a serious subject, naturally takes on the iambic pentameter rhythm. Do you agree?

GINSBERG: Well, it really isn't an accurate thing, I don't think. I've never actually sat down and made a technical analysis of the rhythms that I write. They're probably more near choriambic—Greek meters, dithyrambic meters—and tending toward de DA de

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 ALLEN GINSBERG (1966)

version—like I think there's an anthology of Jewish writers, I forgot who edited that, but a couple of the high-class intellectuals from Columbia. I had written asking them specifically to use the later City Lights version, but they went ahead and printed an asterisked version. I forget what was the name of that—something like *New Generation of Jewish Writing*, Philip Roth, etc.

INTERVIEWER: Do you take difficulties like these as social problems, problems of communication simply, or do you feel they also block your own ability to express yourself for yourself?

GINSBERG: The problem is, where it gets to literature, is this. We all talk among ourselves and we have common understandings, and we say anything we want to say, and we talk about our assholes, and we talk about our cocks, and we talk about who we fucked last night, or who we're gonna fuck tomorrow, or what kinda love affair we have, or when we got drunk, or when we stuck a broom in our ass in the Hotel Ambassador in Prague—anybody tells one's friends about that. So then—what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or with your friends. So I began finding, in conversations with Burroughs and Kerouac and Gregory Corso, in conversations with people whom I knew well, whose souls I respected, that the things we were telling each other for real were totally different from what was already in literature. And that was Kerouac's great discovery in *On the Road*. The kinds of things that he and Neal Cassady were talking about, he finally discovered were *the* subject matter for what he wanted to write down. That meant, at that minute, a complete revision of what literature was supposed to be, in *his* mind, and actually in the minds of the people that first read the book. Certainly in the minds of the critics, who had at first attacked it as not being . . . proper structure, or something. In other words, a gang of friends running around in an automobile. Which obviously is like a great picaresque literary device, and a classical one. And was *not* recognized, at the time, as suitable literary subject matter.

INTERVIEWER: So it's not just a matter of themes—sex, or any other one . . .

GINSBERG: It's the ability to commit to writing, to *write*, the same way that you . . . are! Anyway! You have many writers who have

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preconceived ideas about what literature is supposed to be, and their ideas seem to exclude that which makes them most charming in private conversation. Their faggishness, or their campiness, or their neurasthenia, or their solitude, or their goofiness, or their—even—masculinity, at times. Because they think that they're gonna write something that sounds like something else that they've read before, instead of sounds like them. Or comes from their own life. In other words, there's no distinction, there should be no distinction between what we write down, and what we really know, to begin with. As we know it every day, with each other. And the hypocrisy of literature has been—you know like there's supposed to be formal literature, which is supposed to be different from . . . in subject, in diction and even in organization, from our quotidian inspired lives.

It's also like in Whitman, "I find no fat sweeter than that which sticks to my own bones," that is to say the self-confidence of someone who knows that he's really alive, and that his existence is just as good as any other subject matter.

INTERVIEWER: Is physiology a part of this too—like the difference between your long breath line, and William Carlos Williams's shorter unit?

GINSBERG: Analytically, ex post facto, it all begins with fucking around and intuition and without any idea of *what* you're doing, I think. Later, I have a tendency to explain it, "Well, I got a longer breath than Williams, or I'm Jewish, or I study yoga, or I sing long lines. . . ." But anyway, what it boils down to is this, it's my *movement*, my feeling is for a big long clanky statement—partly that's something that I share, or maybe that I even got from Kerouac's long prose line; which is really, like he once remarked, an extended poem. Like one long sentence page of his in *Doctor Sax* or "The Railroad Earth" or occasionally *On the Road*—if you examine them phrase by phrase they usually have the density of poetry, and the beauty of poetry, but most of all the single elastic rhythm running from beginning to end of the line and ending "mop"!

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever wanted to extend this rhythmic feeling as far as say Artaud or now Michael McClure have taken it—to a line that is actually animal noise?

GINSBERG: The rhythm of the long line is also an animal cry.

from "Sound" New York 1961
January NY 1961

In bed on my green purple red pink
yellow orange bolivian blanket,
the tick of the clock, my back against the wall
--staring into black circled eyes magician
man's bearded glance & story
the kitchen spun in a wheel of vertigo,
the eye in the center of the moving
mandala—the
eye in the hand
the eye in the asshole
The serpent eating or
vomiting its tail
--the blank air a solid wall revolving
around my retina--
The wheel of jewels and fire I saw moving
vaster than my head in Peru
Band circling in band and a black
hole of Calcutta thru which
I stared at my Atman
without a body--

The Giotto window on Boston & giving
to a scene in Bible Palestine
A golden star
and the flight from Egypt
in an instant now
Come true again--the Kabbala sign
in the vomit on the floor--
On a window in Riverside drive,
the boat moving slowly
up the flowing river, small autos
crawling up Hudson Drive
a plash of white snow on
the Balisades
and a circled white park etched
by bare thin branches
with black birds aflutter in the
frosty underbrush
Riverside Drive, as in Breughel,
a girl in the red coat
--a footprint, a lone
coated passerby
on sidewalk under apartment wall--
and a blimp from the war floating in air
over the edge of the city--
Wagner's last echoes, and Baudelaire
inscribing his oceanic page
of confessions
Ah love is so sweet in the Springtime--
and Amor Vincit Omnes
Elliot's voice clanging over the sky
of high Broadway
"Only thru time is time conquered"
I am the answer I will swallow my
vomit and be naked--
A heavy rain, the pluck of a raindrop

① Sept 28 1964

E. 2 STREET
HIGH

W/ Harry Smith

OPTICAL
PHENOMENA

REMEMBERING
LEARY'S BEDROOM
HARVARD
JACK HALLUCINATING

OUT ROBT.
LOWELL'S WINDOW

UNSTEADILY
WALKING
IN
MANHATTAN
NEAR WHERE
POE WROTE
THE
RAVEN

A manuscript page of an unpublished Ginsberg poem.

INTERVIEWER: So you're following that feeling and not a thought or a visual image?

GINSBERG: It's simultaneous. The poetry generally is like a rhythmic articulation of feeling. The feeling is like an impulse that rises within—just like sexual impulses, say; it's almost as definite as that. It's a feeling that begins somewhere in the pit of the stomach and

metaphoric
rises up forward in the breast and then comes out through the mouth and ears, and comes forth a croon or a groan or a sigh. Which, if you put words to it by looking around and seeing and trying to describe what's making you sigh—and sigh in words—you simply articulate what you're feeling. As simple as that. Or actually what happens is, at best what happens, is there's a definite body rhythm that has no definite words, or may have one or two words attached to it, one or two key words attached to it. And then, in writing it down, it's simply by a process of association that I find what the rest of the statement is—what can be collected around that word, what that word is connected to. Partly by simple association, the first thing that comes to my mind like "Moloch is" or "Moloch who," and then whatever comes out. But that also goes along with a definite rhythmic impulse, like DA de de DA de de DA de de DA DA. "Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows." And before I wrote "Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows," I had the word, "Moloch, Moloch, Moloch," and I also had the feeling DA de de DA de de DA de de DA DA. So it was just a question of looking up and seeing a lot of windows, and saying, oh, windows, of course, but what kind of windows? But not even that—"Moloch whose eyes." "Moloch whose eyes"—which is beautiful in itself—but what about it, Moloch whose eyes are *what*? So Moloch whose eyes—then probably the next thing I thought was "thousands." OK, and then thousands *what*? "Thousands blind." And I had to finish it somehow. So I hadda say "windows." It looked good afterward.

metaphoric
Usually during the composition, step by step, word by word and adjective by adjective, if it's at all spontaneous, I don't know whether it even makes sense sometimes. Sometimes I do know it makes complete sense, and I start crying. Because I realize I'm hitting some area which is absolutely true. And in that sense applicable universally, or understandable universally. In that sense able to survive through time—in that sense to be read by somebody and wept to, maybe, centuries later. In that sense prophecy, because it touches a common key . . . What prophecy actually is is not that you actually know that the bomb will fall in 1942. It's that you know and feel something which somebody knows and feels in a hundred years. And maybe articulate it in a hint—concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years.

INTERVIEWER: You once mentioned something you had found in Cézanne—a remark about the reconstitution of the *petites sensations* of experience, in his own painting—and you compared this with the method of your poetry.

GINSBERG: I got all hung up on Cézanne around 1949 in my last year at Columbia, studying with Meyer Schapiro. I don't know how it led into it—I think it was about the same time that I was having these Blake visions. So. The thing I understood from Blake was that it was possible to transmit a message through time which could reach the enlightened, that poetry had a definite effect, it wasn't just pretty, or just beautiful, as I had understood pretty beauty before—it was something basic to human existence, or it reached something, it reached the bottom of human existence. But anyway the impression I got was that it was like a kind of time machine through which he could transmit, Blake could transmit, his basic consciousness and communicate it to somebody else after he was dead, in other words build a time machine.

Now just about that time I was looking at Cézanne and I suddenly got a strange shuddering impression looking at his canvases, partly the effect when someone pulls a venetian blind, reverses the venetian—there's a sudden shift, a flashing that you see in Cézanne canvases. Partly it's when the canvas opens up into three dimensions and looks like wooden objects, like solid space objects, in three dimensions rather than flat. Partly it's the enormous spaces which open up in Cézanne's landscapes. And it's partly that mysterious quality around his figures, like of his wife or the card players or the postman or whoever, the local Aix characters. They look like great huge 3-D wooden dolls, sometimes. Very *uncanny* thing, like a very mysterious thing, in other words there's a strange sensation that one gets, looking at his canvases, which I began to associate with the extraordinary sensation—cosmic sensation, in fact—that I had experienced catalyzed by Blake's "Ah! Sun-flower" and "The Sick Rose" and a few other poems. So I began studiously investigating Cézanne's intentions and method, and looking at all the canvases of his that I could find in New York, and all the reproductions I could find, and I was writing at the time a paper on him, for Schapiro at Columbia in the fine arts course.

And the whole thing opened up, two ways: first, I read a book on Cézanne's composition by Erle Loran, who showed photographs, analyses and photographs of the original motifs, side by side with the actual canvases—and years later I actually went to Aix, with all the postcards, and stood in the spots, and tried to find the places where he painted Mont Sainte-Victoire from, and got in his studio and saw some of the motifs he used like his big black hat and his cloak. Well, first of all I began to see that Cézanne had all sorts of literary symbolism in him, on and off. I was preoccu-

pied with Plotinian terminology, of time and eternity, and I saw it in Cézanne paintings, an early painting of a clock on a shelf which I associated with time and eternity, and I began to think he was a big secret mystic. And I saw a photograph of his studio in Loran's book and it was like an alchemist's studio, because he had a skull, and he had a long black coat, and he had this big black hat. So I began thinking of him as, you know, like a magic character. Like the original version I had thought of him was like this austere dullard from Aix. So I began getting really interested in him as a hermetic type, and then I symbolically read into his canvases things that probably weren't there, like there's a painting of a winding road which turns off, and I saw that as the mystical path: it turns off into a village and the end of the path is hidden. Something he painted I guess when he went out painting with Bernard. Then there was an account of a very fantastic conversation that he had had. It's quoted in Loran's book: there's a long, long, long paragraph where he says, "By means of squares, cubes, triangles, I try to reconstitute the impression that I have from nature: the means that I use to reconstitute the impression of solidity that I think-feel-see when I am looking at a motif like Victoire, is to reduce it to some kind of pictorial language, so I use these squares, cubes and triangles, but I try to build them together so interknit" [Ginsberg interlocks his fingers] "so that no light gets through." And I was mystified by that, but it seemed to make sense in terms of the grid of paint strokes that he had on his canvas, so that he produced a solid two-dimensional surface which when you looked into it, maybe from a slight distance with your eyes either unfocused or your eyelids lowered slightly, you could see a great three-dimensional opening, mysterious, stereoscopic, like going into a stereopticon. And I began discovering in *The Card Players* all sorts of sinister symbols, like there's one guy leaning against the wall with a stolid expression on his face, that he doesn't want to get involved; and then there's two guys who are peasants, who are looking as if they've just been dealt Death cards; and then the dealer you look at and he turns out to be a city slicker with a big blue cloak and almost rouge doll-like cheeks and a fat-faced Kafkian-agent impression about him, like he's a cardsharp, he's a cosmic cardsharp dealing out Fate to all these people. This looks like a great big hermetic Rembrandtian portrait in Aix! That's why it has that funny monumentality—aside from the quote plastic values unquote.

Then, I smoked a lot of marijuana and went to the basement of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and looked at his wa-

tercolors and that's where I began really turning on to space in Cézanne and the way he built it up. Particularly there's one of rocks, I guess *Rocks at Garonne*, and you look at them for a while, and after a while they seem like they're rocks, just the rock parts, you don't know where they are, whether they're on the ground or in the air or on top of a cliff, but then they seem to be floating in space like clouds, and then they seem to be also a bit like they're amorphous, like kneecaps or cockheads or faces without eyes. And it has a very mysterious impression. Well, that may have been the result of the pot. But it's a definite thing that I got from that. Then he did some very odd studies after classical statues, Renaissance statues, and they're great gigantesque herculean figures with little tiny pinheads . . . so that apparently was his comment on them!

And then . . . the things were endless to find in Cézanne. Finally I was reading his letters and I discovered this phrase again, *mes petites sensations*—"I'm an old man and my passions are not, my senses are not coarsened by passions like some other old men I know, and I have worked for years trying to," I guess it was the phrase, "reconstitute the *petites sensations* that I get from nature, and I could stand on a hill and merely by moving my head half an inch the composition of the landscape was totally changed." So apparently he'd refined his optical perception to such a point where it's a real contemplation of optical phenomena in an almost yogic way, where he's standing there, from a specific point studying the optical field, the depth in the optical field, looking, actually looking at his own eyeballs in a sense. The attempting to reconstitute the sensation in his own eyeballs. And what does he say finally—in a very weird statement which one would not expect of the austere old workman, he said, "And this *petite sensation* is nothing other than *pater omnipotens aeterna deus*."

So that was, I felt, the key to Cézanne's hermetic method. . . . Everybody knows his workmanlike, artisanlike, prettified-like painting method which is so great, but the really romanticistic motif behind it is absolutely marvelous, so you realize that he's really a saint! Working on his form of yoga, all that time, in obvious saintly circumstances of retirement in a small village, leading a relatively nonsociable life, going through the motions of going to church or not, but really containing in his skull these supernatural phenomena, and observations. . . . You know, and it's very humble actually, because he didn't know if he was crazy or not—that is a flash of the physical, miracle dimensions of existence, trying to reduce that to canvas in two dimensions, and then trying to

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do it in such a way as it would look if the observer looked at it long enough it would look like as much three dimension as the actual *world* of optical phenomena when one looks through one's eyes. Actually he's reconstituted the whole fucking universe in his canvases—it's like a fantastic thing!—or at least the appearance of the universe.

So, I used a lot of this material in the references in the last part of the first section of "Howl": "sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus." The last part of "Howl" was really an homage to art but also in specific terms an homage to Cézanne's method, in a sense I adapted what I could to writing; but that's a very complicated matter to explain. Except, putting it very simply, that just as Cézanne doesn't use perspective lines to create space, but it's a juxtaposition of one color against another color (that's one element of his space), so, I had the idea, perhaps overrefined, that by the unexplainable, unexplained nonperspective line, that is, juxtaposition of one *word* against another, a *gap* between the two words—like the space gap in the canvas—there'd be a gap between the two words which the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence. In other words when I say, oh... when Shakespeare says, *In the dread vast and middle of the night*, something happens between "dread vast" and "middle." That creates like a whole space of, spaciness of black night. How it gets that is very odd, those words put together. Or in the haiku, you have two distinct images, set side by side without drawing a connection, without drawing a logical connection between them: the *mind* fills in this... this space. Like

O ant
crawl up Mount Fujiyama,
but slowly, slowly.

Now you have the small ant and you have Mount Fujiyama and you have the slowly, slowly, and what happens is that you feel almost like... a cock in your mouth! You feel this enormous space-universe, it's almost a tactile thing. Well anyway, it's a phenomenon-sensation, phenomenon hyphen sensation, that's created by this little haiku of Issa, for instance.

So, I was trying to do similar things with juxtapositions like "hydrogen jukebox." Or... "winter midnight smalltown street-light rain." Instead of cubes and squares and triangles. Cézanne is reconstituting by means of triangles, cubes, and colors—I have to reconstitute by means of words, rhythms of course, and all that—