Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 120

Volume 120

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Janet Witalec
Project Editor

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* (*CLC*) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

Organization of the Book

A *TCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism, Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800, Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism,* and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Yearbook, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined,* ed. Victor A. Kramer (AMS, 1987), 65- 91; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 94-105.

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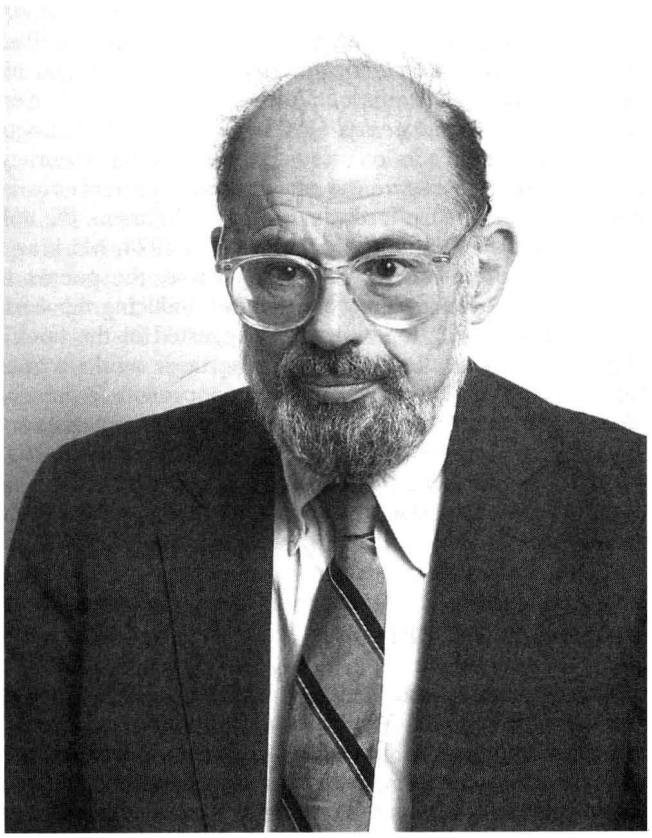
Contents

Allen Ginsberg
1926-1997

American poet, essayist, playwright, and nonfiction writer.

INTRODUCTION

Ginsberg was one of the more celebrated and popular poets in late twentieth-century American literature. A longtime spokesperson for the country's disaffected youth, he was a prominent figure in the counterculture and antiwar movements of the 1960s as well as a leading member of the Beat Generation, a literary movement whose members wrote in the language of the urban streets about previously forbidden and controversial topics. Despite his libertarian beliefs and unconventional literary style, Ginsberg admitted that his verse was influenced by such established poets as William Carlos Williams, William Blake, and Walt Whitman.



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ginsberg's private life has informed much of the critical discussion of his works. Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1926, he endured an emotionally troubled childhood that is reflected in many of his poems. His mother, who suffered from various mental illnesses and was periodically institutionalized during Ginsberg's adolescence, was an active member of the Communist Party and had other associations of the radical left. Contributing to Ginsberg's confusion and isolation during these years was his increasing awareness of his homosexuality, which he concealed from both his peers and his parents until he was in his twenties. First introduced to poetry by his father, a high school teacher and poet, Ginsberg furthered his interest through discussions with his mentor, William Carlos Williams, who lived in nearby Paterson, where Ginsberg attended high school. Other early literary influences included Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren, both of whom taught Ginsberg at Columbia University. Ginsberg also established friendships with writers Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady while in college. This group, along with several West Coast writers that included Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, among others, later formed the core of the San Francisco Beat Movement. In the 1960s Ginsberg generated national media attention for his political activism. He helped organize antiwar demonstrations and advocated "flower power," a strategy in which antiwar demonstrators would promote positive values such as peace and love to dramatize their opposition to the death and destruction caused by the Vietnam War. Around that time, he became influenced by Eastern philosophy, meditation, and yoga, which became a recurring influence on his work. Ginsberg died April 5, 1997, in New York City, from a stroke.

MAJOR WORKS

Considered his best-known poem, the title work of *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) established Ginsberg as a leading voice of the Beat Movement. His public reading of "Howl" to a spellbound audience in San Francisco in 1955 demonstrated the power of his work as an oral medium and set standards for poetry readings throughout the United States. A reflexive, lyrical lamentation on the moral and social ills of the post-World War II era, the poem is dedicated to Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg met while undergoing eight months of therapy at the Columbia Psychiatric Institute in 1948. "Howl" was extremely controversial at the time of its publication because of its graphic language and in 1957 became the subject of a landmark obscenity trial. *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958-1960* (1961) features "Kaddish," an elegy for Ginsberg's mother, who died in a mental hos-

pital in 1956. Based on the Kaddish, a traditional Hebrew prayer for the dead, it poignantly expresses the anger, love, and confusion Ginsberg felt toward his mother while rendering the social and historical milieu that informed his mother's troubled life.

Ginsberg's political experiences inform much of his work of the 1960s and early 1970s, including *Planet News* (1968), which collects poems that are considered impressionistic collages of that era. Several pieces in this collection also reveal his personal concern with aging and his anguish over the deaths of Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac. *The Fall of America* (1973), Ginsberg's next major work, takes the reader on a mystical cross-country journey, with "stops" to observe the physical and spiritual erosion of the United States. Dedicated to Walt Whitman, the collection won the National Book Award in 1974. Marking a change of direction in Ginsberg's verse, the poems in *Mind Breaths* (1978) are more tranquil, inducing the sense of spiritual meditation and calm suggested in the book's title. Ginsberg's last poems, including those works written after he learned he had liver cancer, appear in *Death and Fame: Poems, 1993-1997* (1999). Another posthumous publication, *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952-1995* (2000), contains more than one hundred-fifty essays on such topics as nuclear weapons, censorship, and the Vietnam War.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Commentators have been sharply divided in their opinions of Ginsberg's work. While some critics praised his unstructured form and his exploration of controversial subject matter, others considered his skill overrated, arguing that Ginsberg won his fame through his behavior, such as political protests, the advocacy of drug use and homosexuality, poetry readings, and collaboration with rock bands. No matter the diverse opinions on his poetry and his controversial reputation, most critics acknowledge his contribution in introducing and legitimizing experimental poetry to a wider audience. Moreover, there has been much critical discussion on the influence of such poets as William Blake, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Carlos Williams on Ginsberg's work and the impact and the popularity of the Beat Movement on American literature.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Howl and Other Poems (poetry) 1956
Siesta in Xbalva and Return to the States (poetry) 1956
Empty Mirror: Early Poems (poetry) 1961
Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958-1960 (poetry) 1961
The Change (poetry) 1963
Reality Sandwiches: 1953-1960 (poetry) 1963
Kral Majales (poetry) 1965
Wichita Vortex Sutra (poetry) 1966
TV Baby Poems (poetry) 1967
Airplane Dreams: Compositions from Journals (poetry) 1968
Ankor Wat [with Alexandra Lawrence] (poetry) 1968
The Heart is a Clock (poetry) 1968
Message II (poetry) 1968
Planet News (poetry) 1968
Scrap Leaves, Tasty Scribbles (poetry) 1968
Wales—A Visitation, July 29, 1967 (poetry) 1968
For the Soul of the Planet is Wakening (poetry) 1970
Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963: Notebooks, Diary, Blank Pages, Writings (journals and diary) 1970
The Moments Return: A Poem (poetry) 1970
Notes after an Evening with William Carlos Williams (nonfiction) 1970
Ginsberg's Improvised Poetics (poetry) 1971
Bixby Canyon Ocean Path Word Breeze (poetry) 1972
Iron Horse (poetry) 1972
Kaddish (play) 1972
New Year Blues (poetry) 1972
Open Head (poetry) 1972
The Fall of America: Poems of These States, 1965-1971 (poetry) 1973
The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems, 1948-1952 (poetry) 1973
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Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952-1995 (essays) 2000
Family Business: Selected Letters between Father and Son (letters) 2001

CRITICISM

Thomas Parkinson (essay date 1969)

SOURCE: Parkinson, Thomas. "Reflections on Allen Ginsberg as Poet." In *Poets, Poems, Movements,* pp. 309-11. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987.

[*In the following essay, originally published in 1969, Parkinson debates the poetic value of Ginsberg's verse, contending that it belongs "in the area of religious and spiritual exploration rather than that of aesthetic accomplishment."*]

Allen Ginsberg is a notoriety, a celebrity; to many readers and nonreaders of poetry he has the capacity for releasing odd energetic responses of hatred and love or amused affection or indignant moralizing. There are even people who are roused to very flat indifference by the friendly nearsighted shambling bearded figure who has some of the qualities of such comic stars as Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin. And some of their seriousness.

His latest book, ***Planet News,*** grants another revelation of his sensibility. The usual characteristics of his work are there; the rhapsodic lines, the odd collocations of images and thoughts and processes, the occasional rant, the extraordinary tenderness. His poetry resembles the Picasso sculpture melted together of children's toys, or the sculpture of driftwood and old tires and metal barrels and tin cans shaped by enterprising imaginative young people along the polluted shores of San Francisco Bay. You can make credible Viking warriors from such materials. Ginsberg's poetry works in parallel processes; it is junk poetry, not in the drug sense of junk but in its building blocks. It joins together the waste and loss that have come to characterize the current world, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, the Orient, the United States, Peru. Out of such debris as is offered he makes what poetry he can.

He doesn't bring news of the earth but of the planet. Earth drives us down, confines, mires, isolates, and besides there is less and less earth available to perception and more and more artifice. The late C. S. Lewis might not have enjoyed having his name brought into this discussion, but his great trilogy that begins with *Out of the Silent Planet* and ends with *That Hideous Strength* demonstrates the same concern with the planet as Ginsberg's new book. Both of them see Earth as a planet, part of a solar system, part of a galaxy, part of a universe, cosmic. But where Lewis wrote out of hatred, indignation, and despair at the destruction of tradition by mindless technology, Ginsberg writes from sad lost affection. I think Ginsberg is our only truly sad writer, sad with a heavy, heavy world, and somehow always courageous and content to remain in the human continuum with all his knowledge of human ill and malice clear. He persists.

But is it poetry? This question is so often asked that it does require answering not only within the confines of Ginsberg's work but generally. I am not entirely sure what the question means, since it could legitimately be asked of Whitman or Hart Crane, and has been asked of them. What Ginsberg's work represents is an enormous purging and exorcising operation; it is in the area of religious and spiritual exploration rather than that of aesthetic accomplishment. In the dispute between Whistler and Ruskin over the concept of artistic "finish," Ginsberg's poetry would stand with Whistler's painting. He tends to use the term "poet" not as "maker" but revealer at best; at worst he accepts the notion that makes "poets" out of all confused serious persons who are genuinely unquiet about their souls and the condition of the planet. This is a widely embracing category. What troubles many readers of Ginsberg's work, if they are frank about it, is the continuous and consequently tedious reference to semen, excrement, masturbation, buggery, fornication, and the limited series of variations on such substances and processes. Who needs all the soiled bed-sheets? The only proper answer is that Ginsberg does—or did. They were reminders of the shame, guilt, and disorder that apparently afflicted his sexual life and obsessions; they needed to be purged and declared innocent, and the poems attend seriously to that very problem. To some readers they are frank, courageous, outspoken; others find them violations of the artistic principle of reticence. Both arguments seem to me trivial, having to do with civil rights or social formalities. What occurred in Ginsberg's work seems to me at once more rational and more historically determined than many readers seem willing to admit.

If Ginsberg is nothing else, he is a large contributor to the *Zeitgeist.* Legally and linguistically, he not merely reflects the drift of his time but diverts and channels it, not out of any sensational interest in so acting but out of the necessities that his being exacted from history. The coincidence of his particular hang-ups—and there is no other way to describe them—with the tabus of the society generate a freely inevitable kind of writing. For in addition to the concern for his own troubled being, he is involved in liberating his body and liberating his mind so that both can function properly: spontaneous me, I sing the body electric. In their most considerable work, both Whitman and Ginsberg are intent on destroying those cerebral bonds that impair their sympathy with their bodies and with others. For others appear only in the body. The irony in both writers is that their most rationally ordered poems are those that argue against the rational faculties. In fact, their real quarrel is with the misuse of cerebral power; they share this sense of imbalance with Blake and Lawrence. And there must be moments when Ginsberg would ruefully agree with Lawrence, who answered a correspondent who questioned his intellectual fulminating against the intellect by saying, in effect, that yes, he reminded himself of Carlyle, who once said that he had written fifty books on the virtue of silence.

When such paragraphs as the preceding one place Ginsberg in the realm of Whitman, Blake, Lawrence, and Carlyle, a certain uneasiness might justly prevail. I think that

this is more a matter of habit than of perception. When the Epstein statue of Blake was placed in Westminster Abbey, I felt slightly miserable—it seemed that the British talent for retrospectively accepting the eccentric had overreached itself. I don't want to see Ginsberg canonized because it would take the edge off his work. With contemporary poets, all question of relative evaluation with the mighty dead is impertinent. Some years back an acquaintance of mine was bad-mouthing Robert Frost and ended with what he took to be an unanswerable question, "Will he last?" and I tried to bring him back to biological reality by murmuring, "None of us will." What we can ask from our writers is a willingness to face up to the troubled planet.

Returning again to the sexuality of Ginsberg's work, I find that in this book, arranged chronologically, there seems to be a steady diminution of concern with the vocabulary and processes that bother many otherwise sympathetic readers. Several of the poems are among his very best work: **"Kral Majales"**; **"Who Be Kind To"**; **"Wichita Vortex Sutra"**; **"Wales Visitation."** I can't imagine Ginsberg ever solving to his satisfaction the problems that have troubled his being for so many years; but he does seem to have undergone some profound religious experiences during the past five years that give his work a new density and fullness. He is one of the most important men alive on the planet. We should all be grateful for his presence.

But is he a poet? Again I find the question meaningless. He has written over a dozen first-rate poems; he has brought back to life, through his studies in French and Spanish verse, the Whitman tradition and informed it with a new pulse; he has served as a large part of the prophetic conscience of this country during its darkest period; he has been brave and productive. He has gone off on side-tracks; he has indulged himself publicly in some poems that seem better confined to note-books. But when a man liberates the sense of prosodic possibility and embodies in his work a profoundly meaningful spiritual quest that is compelling and clarifying to any reasonably sympathetic reader, well, yes, he is a poet. Only envy and spite could deny the title.

Paul Portugés (essay date 1984)

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[*In the following essay, Portugés details Ginsberg's visionary experiences and their effect on his poetry.*]

In the bitter winter of 1944, Allen Ginsberg was crossing by ferry to Manhattan in order to take a scholarship and entrance examination for Columbia University. He was, quite naturally, somewhat frightened and excited. Although almost eighteen years old, he still nurtured a secret desire kindled early in his childhood to help save the poor, the abused masses, God's true children. Shivering in the icy wind of the bright, damp morning, he vowed before his Maker to devote his life to helping the "masses in their misery"—if he could only pass his examination: "I went to take the entrance exam at Columbia, Vowed Forever that if I succeeded in the scholarship test and got a chance I would never betray the Ideal—to help the masses in their misery."[1]

Although successful with his examination, Ginsberg slowly learned that he was incapable of saving the common man. He realized that he was not tough enough and that his plan to become a "pure Debs"[2]—that is, a good, Socialist lawyer working for mankind—was mere youthful idealism. Consequently, the young intellectual turned to his poetry, feeling comfortable with the idealism of Whitman, the spiritual visions of Blake, and the fiery lamentations of Jeremiah. Even as he tried to merge with the masses (Ginsberg worked at several blue-collar jobs—welder, kitchen helper, seaman), he knew that his path was less physical than intellectual and mystical.

Finding Columbia University to be less challenging and intellectually engaging than he had hoped, Ginsberg began a study of mysticism and poetry under the tutelage of his friends William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. By the time he was about to graduate from Columbia, he had become immersed in the study of Plotinus, St. John of the Cross, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, William Blake, Rimbaud, and many other Western and Eastern visionaries. He was still seeking a vehicle for his youthful idealism, still hoping to help the masses, although he had realized by then that his path stretched into the nether world of mysticism and poetry rather than along the rough roads of radical politics and hard physical labor.

In 1948, the summer before his graduation, Ginsberg sublet an apartment in Harlem from a divinity student, who, it so happened, had left behind an extensive library of mystical literature for Ginsberg to peruse. Broke, reduced to living on a meager diet of vegetables, Ginsberg had little else to do but read these turgid though fascinating accounts of visions and prophecy. In addition, his friends were gone from New York, either traveling or living incommunicado in Texas (Burroughs) and on Long Island (Kerouac). Ginsberg had become quite morose about the prospect of graduating and still not having fulfilled his desire to help save his fellow man. Some other circumstances had recently occurred that made him even more despondent. His involved love-sex-intellectual relationship with Neal Cassady (the secret hero of **"Howl"**) was abruptly terminated by the fun-loving, never-resting Cassady; he had gone off to California and promptly married. To make matters worse, Ginsberg's mother Naomi (for whom he would write the tragic death lament **"Kaddish"**) had been incarcerated in a mental institution.

So Ginsberg was alone and depressed in his dingy little room reading his library of mystical literature. One late af-

ternoon in July he was studying Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience,* his eyes idling over the poem "Ah! Sunflower," when suddenly he heard a deep, earthen voice in the room. He became transfixed, somehow knowing immediately that it was the voice of William Blake, speaking across the vault of time from beyond the grave: "I didn't think twice . . . it was Blake's voice."[3]

An overwhelming emotion arose in his soul in response to this auditory apparition, a sudden "visual" realization that helped him comprehend the meaning of this awe-inspiring phenomenon. He was, at the moment of this visual sensation, looking out through the window at the sky; suddenly, he felt that, with Blake's voice guiding him, he could penetrate the essence of the universe. He felt himself floating out of his body and thinking that heaven was on earth. He had a great realization that "this existence was it." His sense of hopelessness vanished. He felt he had been chosen to experience a vast cosmic consciousness. Looking out of his window, the sky seemed very ancient. It was the "ancient place that he [Blake] was talking about, that sweet golden clime."

Ginsberg experienced a new sense of himself; he felt ready to undertake a new role in life. Everything that had happened to him—the trials and tribulations of his affair with Cassady, and the loneliness he felt being cut off from his mother and friends—had been a necessary part of the spiritual preparation for his vision:

> —in other words, that this was the moment I was born for. This initiation. Or this vision or this consciousness, of being alive unto myself, alive myself to the Creator. As son of the Creator—who loved me, I realized, or who responded to my desire.

The Creator had allowed him to see "into the depths of the universe." His first thought was that it all made sense, that he was a chosen "spirit angel" blessed by this vision of the universe.[4] His second thought was to "never forget—never forget, never renig [*sic*], never deny" the apparitional voice and the visual illumination.[5] He swore never to get lost in the endless maze of superficial distractions offered by mundane jobs and middle-class pursuits of American life. Instead, he became aware of his obligation as a poet to pursue the visionary calling, for "the spirit of the universe was what I was born to realize."

Across the alley from his room there was an old apartment building, erected circa 1900. Ginsberg became transfixed by the craftsmanship of the cornices of the old tenement. They seemed like the "solidification of a great deal of intelligence and care and love also." In his heightened state of awareness, he noticed that there was in every corner

> where I looked evidences of a living hand, even in the bricks, in the arrangement of each brick. Some hands had placed them there—that some hand had placed the whole universe in front of me. That some hand had placed the sky. No, that's exaggerating—not that some hand had placed the sky but that the sky was the living blue hand itself. Or that God was in front of my eyes—'existence itself was God.'

Ginsberg is here explaining his experience with hindsight. While he was actually looking at the cornices and bricks, the notion that "existence itself was God" was not a conscious or verbal articulation; it was a feeling he had that everything he saw was a divine object.

The feeling of a divine presence, of a Creator or a God, was what gave Ginsberg a sense of cosmic awe about himself and everything he perceived. He began to have a sensation of "light" and experienced a sense of cosmic consciousness. While staring at the tenement cornices, he became aware of an immediate, deeper universe, an awareness that allowed him to penetrate the surface of things. He felt that the doors of perception had been cleansed, that he was a living example of Blake's demand that the poet must widen the areas of consciousness and be able to see "Eternity in a grain of sand/Infinity in an hour."

Everything he looked at he saw anew. The bricks and cornices of the apartment building took on a supernatural glow. The sky and the light of the late afternoon became an "eternal light superimposed on everyday light."[6] Ginsberg characterized these perceptions as an example of Blake's dictum that the "eye altering alters all." He felt that the light had always been there but that until the vision he had not been able to see it. The vision of Blake's "Ah! Sunflower" had changed him forever.

Shortly after his first vision, Ginsberg heard Blake's voice again. This time Blake was chanting "The Sick Rose":

> O Rose, thou art sick!
> The invisible worm
> That flies in the night,
> In the howling storm,
>
> Has found out thy bed
> Of crimson joy,
> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy.

Hearing the voice, Ginsberg became frightened. The awe and exuberance he had felt during his first vision was replaced by a dark sense of doom. Ginsberg thought that he was like the sick rose and that the prophetic poet Blake was seeking him out to make him face death. When he heard the last line of the poem, Ginsberg was convinced that the sick rose was himself and that "Blake's character might be the one that's entered the body and is destroying it, or let us say death, some kind of mystical being of its own, trying to come in and devour the body, the rose."[7] In this frame of mind, Ginsberg also felt that he was being instructed, not only about his own death, but about the "doom of the whole universe." He became morbid, feeling as though he had no alternative but to accept the basic truth of Blake's message. However, once having accepted it, Ginsberg became aware that it possessed a strange yet inevitable beauty. He was scared and delighted, simultaneously.

Hearing the prophecy of doom, Ginsberg became convinced that he had been chosen to experience an ultimate

truth. The symbolic, obscure meaning of "this little magic formula statement in rhyme" had been unveiled to him so that he could, as a poet, be party to the secrets that could deliver others, and himself, beyond the universe.[8] Ginsberg had been given knowledge of death: "my death and also the death of being itself, and that was the great pain. So, like a prophecy, not only in human terms but a prophecy as if Blake had penetrated the very secret core of the entire universe."[9]

After absorbing the burden of doom he experienced from "The Sick Rose," Ginsberg had still another vision. He heard Blake chanting in a hypnotic tone the refrains of his poem, "The Little Girl Lost":

> Do father, mother, weep
> Where can Lyca sleep.
>
> How can Lyca sleep
> If her mother weep.
>
> If her heart does ache
> Then let Lyca wake;
> If my mother sleep,
> Lyca shall not weep.

The effect of the heavy, masculine rhymes caused Ginsberg to go into a deep trance. His consciousness seemed to double, even triple, in its ability to perceive the hitherto secret, unrevealed meaning of things. He realized later that the repetitive sounds of the rhymes, chanted by Blake's "earthen voice" caused him to lose all sense of his body, normal time, and normal consciousness. It was as though he were under a magical spell, bewitched.

As he had identified himself with the dying rose, so Ginsberg thought that the little lost girl, Blake's Lyca, symbolized his deepest self, as well as his universal self. The mother and father seeking the lost child/self/Ginsberg were God the Father and Creator, and Blake. When he heard Blake chanting the lines "if her heart does ache / Then let Lyca wake," Ginsberg thought that he was being called to "wake" to a state of visionary awareness.

He knew his consciousness had expanded—miraculously—when he looked, once again, at the cornices of the apartment building. He realized he had an altered sense of perception: "Which is what Blake was talking about. In other words a breakthrough from ordinary habitual consciousness into consciousness that was really seeing eternity in a flower . . . heaven in a grain of sand. As I was seeing heaven in the cornices of the building." He now saw the cornices as a communication of the eternal in a finite world. The intelligence of the workman who had laid the bricks communicated beyond time and the grave; a lasting intelligence existed, even beyond death.

With this new awareness, Ginsberg began to see everything as symbolic of an eternal intelligence. Before his vision, he had not even noticed the cornices, nor had he noticed the ordinary sunlight. The vision helped him see deeper into everyday reality. Ginsberg had never realized that everything—every object, every body, every "thing"—had sublime, spiritual significance. With his new consciousness, he now saw the cornices as

> spiritual labor . . . that somebody had labored to make a curve in a piece of tin—to make a cornucopia out of a piece of industrial tin. Not only that man, the workman, the artisan, but the architect had thought of it, the builder had paid for it, the smelter had smelt it, the miner had dug it up out of the earth, the earth had gone through eons of preparing it. So the little molecules had slumbered for . . . for kalpas. So out of "all" these kalpas it all got together in a great succession of impulses, to be frozen finally in that one form of cornucopia cornices on the building front. And God knows how many people made the moon. Or what spirits labored . . . to set fire to the sun.

The awareness Ginsberg achieved on hearing Blake's voice offered him a sense of "total consciousness . . . of the complete universe" and entailed the ability to see ordinary reality as a compendium of infinite, sublime meanings. It can be compared to Blake staring into the sun and seeing, not only a bright, glowing, orange disc in the sky, but a band of angels singing "holy! holy!" This perception of the sun (or of a cornice) is, according to Ginsberg, "different from that of a man who just sees the sun, without any emotional relationship to it."

During and after Ginsberg's other visionary experiences—particularly under the spell of Blake's poem "The Little Girl Lost"—he felt as though he had participated in the total consciousness of the universe. The change in his ordinary state of mind allowed him to feel himself in the presence of a Creator, blessed with the ability to see into the truth of things; he had developed "a consciousness that was really seeing all heaven in a flower." His visions convinced him that he had been chosen as a "spirit angel"—which, he thought, was a "terrible fucking situation to be confronted with." He realized that his visionary experiences were not unlike the calling forth of the Hebrew prophets by their Creator, when he appeared to them in their visions. Ginsberg was beginning to realize that his role as a poet also entailed a kind of prophetic quest; his immediate problem, though, was how to make this plain to people without alarming them.

In time, Ginsberg would develop an identity of himself as a poet-prophet. It was what he called the "Messianic Thing," which he worked at over the years. But, at first, the overwhelming sense of his visions was so awesome, so frightening, that he was worried it might scare others away, or that he would be attacked for communicating the awful truths of the surety of death and of universal doom, or even of the blissful and startling perception of eternity:

> So there was that immediate danger. It's taken me all these years to manifest it and work it out in a way that's materially communicable to people. Without scaring them or me. Also movements of history and breaking down the civilization. To break down everybody's