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The Phenomenological Beat: Allen Ginsberg's Many Multitudes

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THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BEAT: ALLEN GINSBERG’S MANY
MULTITUDES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts English
Department of Literature & Languages

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Abstract

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A considerable amount of critical commentary about Allen Ginsberg has focused on his public persona and on his relationship with the Beat Generation. This focus runs counter to Ginsberg’s own wishes, as he wished to be studied as a poet first, a serious poet, and a poet speaking for a new American voice. By focusing on the poetry and on Ginsberg’s extensive amount of self-analysis, this paper details the main strategies and techniques Ginsberg employed in his poetics, and how he used those techniques to form a modern American voice in poetry.

The paper specifically looks at Ginsberg’s relationship to the imagists, his use of meditation and drug use, his focus on the natural breath and its role in the line, his use of melopoeia, logopoeia, and phanopoeia, his reliance on repetition and meter, the concept of juxtaposed imagery and gaps in consciousness, and the ways in which his poetry is phenomenological. The paper also includes analysis of Ginsberg’s poetry after the “Howl” era, as it argues that Ginsberg should not be defined by one poem or by his role in one social movement; instead, the whole of his work should be looked at as a supreme example of a modern American voice.
“There is no one Allen Ginsberg. All the constituents of being are transitory.”

– Allen Ginsberg, Writers Uncensored, 1991

INTRODUCTION

In a 1987 interview with Steve Silberman, Allen Ginsberg was asked how he would like to be remembered. He answered, “As an ecstatic poet, or a poet whose work could inspire or elevate others’ minds; or a poet who spread some sense of expansion of awareness, or expansive consciousness” (Ginsberg, First Thought 181). Later, in 1997 just before his death, when posed with the same question by Gary Pacernick, Ginsberg answered differently: “I’d like to be remembered as someone who advanced … the notion of compassion in open heart, open form poetry, continuing the tradition of Whitman and Williams” (First Thought 249).

None of these desires have been honored.

Instead, Allen Ginsberg has been remembered in popular culture as the Kerouac sidekick Beat, the maniacal, frantic hippy, or the homosexuality and drug use advocate, while in academic culture he has mostly been remembered as important to the legacy of American culture more because of what he preached and who he hanged out with than for what he wrote. When it comes to his poetry, only “Howl” (and to a lesser extent “Kaddish”) has secured a place in the canon while all of his poetry post-1961 and all of his teachings on poetry have been ignored. Suffice to say, the amount of critical
commentary on Ginsberg’s work is lacking, especially when considering comparable poets like Walt Whitman and those from the imagist movement, the modernist movement, the post-modern movement, and the confessional genre. Additionally, most critical commentary has ignored Ginsberg’s contributions to the technique of American verse, voice, and consciousness because most readers and critics have ignored the work and instead focused on the social philosophy of the Beat Generation.

Ignorance about Ginsberg’s technique, philosophy, and process, rejection of his later poetry, and the failure to connect his writing to the more complex branches of American literary history has cheapened Ginsberg’s legacy. Focus on his impact on popular culture and focus on biography have distanced Ginsberg from the hallowed halls of American poets like William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, and Walt Whitman, and has positioned him in a role he never wanted to be defined by: cultural critic.

Allen Ginsberg was a poet. He wanted to be remembered as a poet. His legacy should be in his poetry. What is needed is a larger batch of scholarship dedicated to Ginsberg’s method and poetics, to the way he incorporated modern and post-modern concepts into composition, and to the way he merged traditional and avant-garde techniques and voice into a new kind of soul poetry beyond just “Howl.” To understand Ginsberg’s poetics, a number of factors must be examined. This paper will focus on how Ginsberg’s legacy should be defined, and it will also examine a number of the factors and techniques that define Ginsberg’s work, namely the following: Ginsberg’s relationship to and modification of American imagist philosophy (most notably to William Carlos Williams), his use of phenomenology, the ways in which he attempted to use poetry to
alter consciousness, his use of surreal juxtaposition of imagistic phrases (building on the work of Ginsberg critic Paul Portügés), his process of composition, his new American form, and his post-modern technique.

Naturally, it makes sense to look at Ginsberg’s most influential work, *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), but this paper will also look at the entire scope of Ginsberg’s collected works in order to trace the development of what Ginsberg did in 1956 all the way to what he was doing in his final poems just before his death near the turn of the century.

- Allen Ginsberg was many things. He was the bearded mystic, a surveyor of consciousness, universe explorer, shaman of the mind, poet yogi, social disrupter, dreamer, master intellectual of form fused with feeling, and multifaceted, ever-changing Buddhist, reincarnated a million times over his human lifetime.

He was Allen Ginsberg. He was complex.

And his complexity was not lost on him. For example, in his most contentious interview, a 1989 interview with born-again Christian John Lofton, Ginsberg harks on the complexity of his being, quoting Whitman over and over in defense of his own ideologies and philosophies: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well. I contradict myself, / (I am large. I contain multitudes.)” (Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind* 484). Lofton, resolute in his judgement and attack against what he calls Ginsberg’s “rotten” lifestyle, tells the poet that such a statement is gibberish, to which Ginsberg responds, “The mind that notices that it contradicts itself is bigger than the smaller mind that is taking one side or the
other” (485). Even in the philosophical dig, Ginsberg’s hyper self-awareness is on display.

Ginsberg was highly aware of all his contradictions—of the various ways he wished to be remembered, of the various approaches he took to poetry, of the contradictions he utilized in his poetry to create an effect of heightened consciousness. After all, Ginsberg’s obsession was awareness of self and of humanity, the world, the universe. Awareness of awareness, the ability to step outside oneself and see through to the inside; the ability to dig deeper into oneself to explore and understand the outside. And in this heightened visionary state, Ginsberg was well aware of the simple yet profound fact he ends Lofton’s interview with: “Nothing is completely black and white. Nothing” (498).

This last quotation is a solid refrain for understanding Ginsberg’s poetics, mainly because nothing in Ginsberg is black or white. His career unfolded in a thousand ways with each new direction following the sprawling tangents and digressions of his fascinating mind. Are we to remember him for his compassion, his human sympathy, and his commitment to love? For his idiosyncrasies and taboos? For his identification and rejection of the lost soul of 20th century society? Or are we to remember him for his technical focus on the relationship between the line and the breath, for his expansion of American modernism in his experimentations with American speech, for his focus on changing the traditional attention to meter in poetry, or for his alteration of poetry’s focus, moving the topics of verse to what he believed were more honest presentations of thought?
Nothing is completely black and white. Nothing. “The world is too infinite for the finite mind to make absolutes” (*First Thought* 100).

**AMERICAN IMAGISM**

When asked how he defined good poetry, Ginsberg quoted Ezra Pound: “‘Phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia.’ Phanopoeia—casting an image on the mind’s eye. Melopoeia—having a musical cadence. Logopoeia—the play of intellect among the words” (*First Thought* 216). All three of these concepts were central to Ginsberg’s burgeoning talents in the 1950s and continued throughout his entire life, and he learned their value through his most important living mentor, William Carlos Williams.

Upon their initial correspondence, Williams encouraged Ginsberg to engage in phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia as opposed to the more abstract verse Ginsberg was writing at the time. Williams’s conception of phanopoeia can be described many ways. Ginsberg referred to it as “imagistically observed detail” (Ginsberg, *Facsimile* 154), “elemental observations” (*Spontaneous Mind* 402), “concrete direct prose statements” (Ginsberg, *Best Minds* 363), “actualities” (*Best Minds* 365), “concrete particular detail” (*First Thought* 123), and “direct observation of what’s in front of you” (*Spontaneous Mind* 271). The idea is that the poet communicates concrete reality, grounding the image in something understandable and simple, as opposed to metaphysical, abstract, or vague metaphorical imagery the imagists thought dominated the 19th century.
Along with the focus on observed detail, Ginsberg also gathered that phanopoeia included a sort of turn from inner-consciousness to outer-consciousness. Ginsberg described this in detail, saying,

> It takes an interior rumination and then suddenly [there’s] a switch and the attention goes to the external world from the interior illumination and bullshit … suddenly waking up out of interior rumination and putting attention into the external world. (*Best Minds* 364)

Phanopoeia requires an attempt to connect “one phase of consciousness to another, one unconscious daydreaming to a real place, a focus on the external phenomenal world” (365). Ginsberg liked to use his poem “Marijuana Notation” as an example of this. The poem opens and spends the majority of its lines focused on Ginsberg’s internal feelings while high. Then, near the end of the poem, as he is internally ruminating on the divine image of Baudelaire, there is a sudden jump to external concrete observed detail: “It is solitude that / produces these thoughts. // It is December / almost, they are singing / Christmas carols / in front of the department / stores down the block on / Fourteenth Street” (*Best Minds* 364). The point of this jump from thought to observation is explained later in this paper, but in terms of phanopoeia, the idea is that concrete imagery combined with internal thought presents both a complete picture of consciousness and “a jump of attentiveness of the mind from a small thing to awareness of a giant panorama” (*Best Minds* 369). The combination allows the reader and the poet to experience their place in the universe – to understand how the individual relates to the universal.

While Ginsberg’s imagery was greatly affected by Williams’s focus on phanopoeia, Williams’s experiments with melopoeia had perhaps an even greater effect on what would ultimately become Ginsberg’s style. The imagists, led by Pound, attempted to move English poetry from the iambic foot and blank verse to a more
modern, commonly used, and natural measure. Ginsberg has spoken about this at great length, but the key aspects of melopoeia to focus on are Ginsberg’s obsession with natural speech measures he learned from Williams, Ginsberg’s focus on the breath and its relation to the line (which is discussed later in this paper), and Ginsberg’s focus on spoken poetry as opposed to poetry read in one’s head. Though an obsession with speech patterns might not seem like a major aspect of Ginsberg’s poetics (considering his popular and critical reputation), he has defined melopoeia as fundamental and essential, saying in 1968, “experimental prosody has been the main tradition in American and English poetry for the better part of this last century” (Spontaneous Mind 112). Ginsberg took up Williams’s goal of defining a new American poetic voice and rhythm, differentiating it from what had been done in Europe since Shakespeare. According to Ginsberg, “Williams … moved out into trying to isolate the rhythms of actual speaking, and that led my own [Ginsberg’s] generation to projective verse, writing in the living speech rather than in an imitation of an older English cadence” (First Thought 237). Williams advised Ginsberg to divert from traditional blank verse and explore his own rhythms and breath, and Ginsberg took that advice and ran. Later on, after he had read Whitman with more depth, Ginsberg combined Whitman’s long line with the American measures he had been exploring, and then even later he combined measure, breath, and the long line with his Buddhist chanting to produce a kind of spoken poetry intended on producing a hypnotic effect.

holy! The skin is holy! / The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand / and asshole holy!” (Ginsberg, *Howl* 27). Ginsberg chants the word ‘holy’ for hypnotic effect, repeating the trochee over and over. Then each phrase consists of an iambic foot and an amphibrachic foot for further hypnotic effect, but the final line uses a bacchius foot as a sort of climactic rise before returning to the original trochaic foot. So while there is a pattern, there is no loyalty to traditional meter, and the lines correspond to the breath, with the longer lines producing a rapid, chanted exclamation and the shorter lines calming the breath.

Another example with similar meter is earlier in the poem: “Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the / loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy / judger of men!” (21). The chanted hypnotic lines follow a mostly trochaic pattern with amphibrachic feet capping off phrases longer than one foot and an iambic foot at the very end. This sort of measured melopoeia is something Ginsberg would come back to continuously.

Finally, logopoeia combines melopoeia and phanopoeia to form a new association in the reader’s mind as a result of the visual and the auditory qualities of the poetry. For Ginsberg, a lot of logopoeia was wrapped up in his conception of phanopoeia and the transition from internal consciousness to observed detail (or vice versa), but it is still important to acknowledge that Ginsberg viewed logopoeia as something worth separating from the other two concepts, and something that he wished to get at the heart of in his poetry. Though he does not explicitly say it, Ginsberg’s pursuit of logopoeia is probably the most important for him of the three. This is mainly because logopoeia works to induce imagination and emotion (generally, connections) in the reader, thus – according
to Ginsberg – elevating their consciousness. Ginsberg spent a lot of time defining this action, and at its simplest it is complex. In 1976, he told Paul Portuges,

only presentation of detail—what you saw—speaks and transmits to other people the mental quality of visionary realization … Williams was experiencing it as ordinary everyday Rutherford consciousness, while I, for long decades’ time, thought it was special heightened consciousness, even visionary. (First Thought 113-14)

Logopoeia, for Ginsberg, in a sense, is the ability to combine sight, thought, and rhythm to transcend a conscious view of the world from ordinary to visionary. He clearly saw this in Williams. When analyzing “The Red Wheelbarrow,” he defines the poem’s message as “all human consciousness depends on direct observation of what’s in front of you” (Spontaneous Mind 271). His conclusion arrives as a result of the poem’s use of phanopoeia—“red wheelbarrow … glazed rainwater … white chickens”—and the poem’s melopoeia—its pattern of words per line and the meter: u/ u/ uu/ uu/ uu /uu /u (almost the entirety of the poem follows an iambic cadence with a sort of anapestic middle section and some trochaic breaks near the end). Clearly, Ginsberg applies this to his own poetry, as he proclaims, “the only way I could actually communicate the sense of eternity that I had, or might have, or wanted to have, was through concrete particular detail grounding my mind” (First Thought 123).

Taken as a whole, there is a clear link between Ginsberg’s poetics and that of the imagists. Ginsberg’s goal in combing phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia was the elevation of consciousness he so desperately wished to see in the America he experienced—the elevation of consciousness that he thought he had reached when he had visionary hallucinations of William Blake in 1948 or the kinds of elevated consciousness he had experienced when taking drugs.
An obsession with consciousness and pursuit of elevated consciousness hounded him for many years. In 1985, he said,

Ultimately, I think … the basic function of poetry [is] to touch on that level of consciousness and awaken other people, by making little models of epiphanous moments which will then catalyze their awareness, cut through their daydreaming, and wake them up, concentrate other people’s microscopic attention on that little, small spot … to “minute particulars.”

(First Thought 161)

To the end, Ginsberg’s poetry attempts to create logopoeia in both reader and poet. To the end, Ginsberg’s poetry stays true to Williams’s advice about natural melopoeia and concrete phanopoeia. But to these concepts, Ginsberg attempted to incorporate additional techniques—mainly post-modern, avant-garde, and Beat techniques—to evolve the imagistic view of verse into a distinctly common, modern, American form. Through this pursuit, he believed he could write poetry that would expand the consciousness of the reader. Some of the ways he sought to do this are discussed below, but it is important to remember that Ginsberg thought the goal of consciousness expansion was the most important legacy he could create.

And yet, nothing is completely black and white. Nothing. The world is too infinite for the finite mind to make absolutes. As Whitman and Ginsberg proclaim, “I am large. I contain multitudes.” Producing elevated consciousness logopoeia through phanopoeia and melopoeia is just the beginning. Ginsberg’s attempts to transcend consciousness require explorations into many more aspects of his method. Thus, what follows are some of his multitudes.
CÉZANNE AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Though Ginsberg had many artistic muses, it was Paul Cézanne’s Post-Impressionistic work that gripped him in the immediate lead up to the composition of “Howl.” Paul Portugés describes Cézanne as “someone devoted to the systematic study of the mystical in the natural world” (Portugés, “Pater Omnipotens” 435), and says his main preoccupation was “to alter his own and his viewer’s appreciation of the phenomenal world” (436). The alteration comes from the artist’s presentation of mystical elements within the natural world. Cézanne pursued this goal through what he called “petites sensations” and the sensation of the “Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus” (the All-powerful Father, Eternal God) in nature. Ginsberg thought Cézanne had 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 … at his own eyeballs in a sense. (Ginsberg, Writers 294)

Ginsberg thought this way of seeing the world was an example of an elevated consciousness. Portugés claims “Ginsberg sought to develop a poetry that would help the reader find ‘Heaven and Eternity’ not beyond the borders of the canvas but between the lines and images of a poem” (“Pater Omnipotens” 439). Ginsberg backs this up, saying in 1974, “the experience of Blake [Ginsberg’s hallucinatory visions] was that through poetry you could catalyze in the reader the experience of Pater Omnipotens Eterna [sic] Deus, an experience of eternal consciousness” (First Thought 53). So by dedicating “himself to the investigation of unusual modalities of consciousness,” (“Pater Omnipotens” 435), Ginsberg sought to accomplish in writing what Cézanne accomplished on canvas. His entire early career was dedicated to this pursuit, and his
1956 poems were the culmination of all his efforts. He sought to investigate unusual modalities of consciousness in order to transcend perception and experience of the phenomenal world, which, in transcendental phenomenology, would be the exploration of the essence of phenomena. To do this, Ginsberg believed he needed to transcribe “inside-mind-thought” (Facsimile 153), or the internal language inside the mind—the actual voice of thoughts—to “communicate his visions and his heightened awareness of reality to an audience bent on denying the mundane as well as the sublime” (Portugés, Visionary Poetics 23). To Ginsberg, transcribing inside-mind-thought was the way to present an honest voice in his poetry. An honest voice is an authentic, natural voice free from the constraints of the world—a “holy” voice. Ginsberg described it as “the ability to commit to writing, to write, the same way that you … are! … a rhythmic articulation of feeling” (Writers 288-89). An honest voice is able to present the true relationship between feeling and experience while avoiding a biased view informed by preconceived notions and by a natural mindset not freed by the understanding that it is a part of what is being observed—a concept transcendental phenomenologist Edmund Husserl coined “bracketing,” essentially meaning an observer’s impartial view of experience, defined only by perception and how perception is experienced. Therefore, an honest voice is a bracketed voice and a bracketed voice is a transcendent voice.

But Ginsberg’s relationship with phenomenological concepts goes deeper than just Husserl. It goes back to William Carlos Williams. Williams’s imagistic influence helped Ginsberg develop his ability to transcribe bracketed observations with a bracketed voice, but Ginsberg’s inclusion of “interior associative logic” interferes with bracketing. “Interior associative logic” essentially means adding context and connecting previous
experience to what is being observed, for the benefit of the poet and the reader. This contradicts the very concept of bracketing, so in this way, Ginsberg was actually embodying interpretative phenomenologist Martin Heidegger’s view that observation of phenomena cannot be bracketed, but instead is always influenced by context and preconceived notions, and that consciousness and reality are related and work together to create meaning. Therefore, Ginsberg was attempting to do something contradictory: he was attempting to tap into a transcendent consciousness that could use language to transcribe honest, bracketed observations (transcendental phenomenology) while simultaneously associating observation with personal experience and meaning (interpretative phenomenology) in an attempt to elevate the reader to an elevated consciousness. This contradiction, in a way, relates to logopoeia in the sense that observed phenomena can combine with internal association to create meaning and awareness.

Though contradictory, such a method creates text that focuses on perceived experiences to produce meaning that transcends ordinary experience. In Ginsberg’s case, the experiences would be his and his friends’ reality in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the meaning would be the spiritual consciousness he found in Cézanne’s Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus. Ginsberg’s chief strategies for achieving his goals were the use of surreal juxtapositions to create gaps in consciousness, repetitive structures to create a sort of meditative hypnosis for himself and the reader, and stream of consciousness in order to transcribe “the natural flow of the mind” (Facsimile 153)—the “inside-mind-thought” mentioned above.
The use of these techniques to present an altered consciousness and a new way of viewing experience is an important innovation of Ginsberg’s 1950s poetics. Yet there are still misconceptions about how he went about altering his own consciousness, with the popular assumption being drug use. While drug use was an essential method of experimentation for Ginsberg in the 50s and 60s, he quickly moved on from drugs and instead focused on Buddhist meditation. This transition will be discussed later. For now, it is important to understand how exactly Ginsberg defined the transcended consciousness and what he was trying to wake himself and others from.

MODALITIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

To fully grasp Ginsberg’s technique and philosophy, it is important to contextualize his historical moment. Coming out of World War II and entering the Cold War and Eisenhower Presidency, Ginsberg saw a rise in conformity and a willful attachment to materialism spread through America. A literature student at Columbia at this time and having grown up in the home of a poet and a mother suffering from mental illness, Ginsberg was already prone to deep fascinations with artistry, reflection, perception, and consciousness. Being a closeted homosexual contributed a sense of alienation, meeting William Burroughs turned him on to drug experimentation and self-analysis (Burroughs was his amateur psychoanalyst), and meeting Jack Kerouac gave him poetic and spiritual inspiration, as he always saw Kerouac as a luminary and a better writer than himself. Ginsberg’s social circle, his experiences, and his exposure to modern artistic movements put him in conflict with traditional artistic thinkers like his poet-father and Lionel Trilling, his professor at Columbia. Finally, Ginsberg’s meeting, love affair, and breakup
with Neal Cassady sunk him into a depression that helped create the conditions for his 1948 mystical visions of William Blake. Ginsberg has talked extensively about the vision, so it is not worth repeating here. But his explanations about the vision were always pretty consistent, with the main takeaway being that the vision resulted from Ginsberg being “cut off from what [he had] idealized romantically” in his life, and it resulted in him seeing “into the depths of the universe” (Writers 302-03). It was a religious experience, and he experienced a series of these over the course of a few days. These visions formed the basis of Ginsberg’s poetic aspirations and philosophy for the next fifteen years (Visionary Poetics 3).

Beyond Blake, Gregory Stephenson believes Ginsberg’s ultimate goal during this period was to transform “his season in hell into new resolve and purpose” in order to escape the “nightmare … of contemporary society.” He says Ginsberg placed “the source of human woe within human consciousness and perception” (220-21). This is true, but Stephenson is missing one crucial concept: Ginsberg placed the source of human woe within the collective consciousness, not individual consciousness. Ginsberg believed the individual consciousness had become too wrapped up in the collective American consciousness—a consciousness that revolved around Cold War paranoia, suppression of thought and experience, and prejudice. Ginsberg described this as a society defined by “war rules” and argued that he needed “to come to some original relationship with mind and with compassion and with sympathy” (Best Minds 29). He saw America “as having consistently ignored, suppressed, and destroyed any manifestation of the miraculous, the ecstatic, the sacred, and the epiphanean” (Stephenson 221), and he wished to transcend these shortcomings through transcendence of the individual mind.
The Beat Generation formed in response to America’s collective consciousness. It was formed by those who were “perceptive and receptive to a vision” of truth, and it was concerned with “general liberation: Sexual … Gay Liberation, Black Liberation, Women’s Liberation … liberation of the word from censorship … decriminalization of some of the laws against marijuana and other drugs … opposition to the military-industrial machine civilization,” and more (Best Minds 2-4). Late in his life, in 1995, Ginsberg reflected on the Beat Generation and offered a detailed progression of the Beats’ concerns:

Our basic themes were some kind of “new consciousness,” sexual cancour [sic], and tolerance … Then, there was an interest in psychedelic drugs … from the point of view of a change of consciousness and a “new consciousness” … Then there was a concern for ecology … Then there was an anti-war peaceableness … Then there was a whole introduction of Eastern thought and meditation … Then, most importantly, there was the opening up of verse and prose forms to new experiments. (First Thought 204-06)

Central to all of these ideas is change, and the heart of the change is a change in thinking. Ginsberg believed that by closing the individual mind to change and to different and new expressions of individuality, America had closed itself to progress, tolerance, and expansion.

His argument against the closing of America’s consciousness is the basis of his poem “America.” The poem rallies against what Ginsberg saw as an over-civilized conscious state; a “human culture [that] had become divorced from a necessary interaction with the mythic forces of the natural world” (Jackson 308). Colloquially, this period is known as the Leave it to Beaver generation—a white, Christian, suburban, harmonious façade of true existence where nobody has any real problems, and everyone looks the same. “America” is explicit and honest in its assessment of this American
consciousness. Ginsberg sounds defeated yet defiant in the opening lines: “I can’t stand my own mind. / America when will we end the human war? / Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb … America when will you be angelic? / When will you take off your clothes? … You made me want to be a saint” (Howl 39). America’s consciousness was clothed, poisoned by the bomb, and unable to attain a beatific soul. Ginsberg cries out his mission to transcend what America had given him. His cry is made with religious language, positioning his argument against America in a spiritual light. This aligns with Ginsberg’s own descriptions throughout the years. Similar to his description in 1995, in his introduction to his Beat Generation course at Naropa University, he describes the Beat Generation as “primarily a spiritual movement,” focused on “spiritual breakthroughs, or epiphanous experience, or illuminated experience, or alterations of consciousness, or psychedelic insight” (Best Minds 22). “America” sets the stage of Beat defiance, calling out the culture Ginsberg saw as a machine.

But the Beats didn’t only define the problems with American consciousness, they also actively fought them. They fought with “mystical visions and cosmic vibrations” (Ginsberg, Howl 40) in an attempt to reach a beatific consciousness. Ginsberg expresses this in “A Supermarket in California” when he has a vision of walking through a supermarket with Walt Whitman. In this vision, he reflects on the collective consciousness of the country, asking Whitman’s spirit “what America did you have when Charon quit / poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank / and stood watching the boat disappear on the black / waters of Lethe?” (Howl 30). This is a lament for a romantic sort of consciousness. The walk with Whitman is labeled an odyssey, and the old poet is described like a mythical character whose beard points the way. With him,
Ginsberg asks if they’ll dream “of the lost America of love / past blue automobiles in driveways” (Howl 30), juxtaposing the romantic vision of the past with the materialistic image of the present. The poem ends with the reminder that Whitman is dead, suggesting that the psychological struggle against the collective consciousness often feels like a Sisyphean task, something that could leave Ginsberg and his friends beaten down.

He echoes this theme in “America”:

Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?
I’m obsessed by Time Magazine.
I read it every week.
Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner

It occurs to me that I am America. (Howl 40-41)

The fight against normal consciousness—against a Time Magazine emotional life—is the same fight against Moloch in “Howl”: “Moloch whose name is the mind!” (Ginsberg, Howl 22). In the fight against Moloch, Ginsberg again expresses his defiance and his inability to fully escape: “Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom / I am a consciousness without a body! … Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch!” (22). Ginsberg’s fight is against something that defines not only the world around him but himself too, as it is impossible to fully liberate the individual consciousness from the surrounding collective consciousness of time and space. But Ginsberg tried.

To fight against the collective consciousness, Ginsberg sought other states of consciousness. While Ginsberg only vaguely described the states he was seeking, Portugés identifies Ginsberg’s studies of Buddhism, focusing on sunyata, which is “the Buddhist formula for absence of rational, controlled mind” (“Pater Omnipotens” 445). Ginsberg described sunyata as “the space between thoughts” (Facsimile 130) and the
state “in which everything comes in quietly, simultaneously,” emptiness (*First Thought* 53), connecting it with Cézanne’s gaps in consciousness that Ginsberg explored through surreal juxtaposition. Sunyata allows for transcendence—that is, the ability to remove oneself from normal existence and consciousness; to become detached from everything and open to the universe. Ginsberg’s idea was that achieving sunyata would allow him to transcribe experience in an honest, bracketed way because sunyata was a transcendent state that could allow him to fully escape the confines of the collective consciousness.

“Transcription of Organ Music” explores this state of being. In the poem, Ginsberg paints a picture of the transcended consciousness, describing it as seeing “the feeling in the heart of things” (*Howl* 32) as he walks amongst his books and his flowers. He uses the repeated imagery of objects opening, suggesting the transcended consciousness is akin to the opening of a door into a new room. Images of blooming flowers add a layered meaning of rebirth into a new consciousness, which Ginsberg describes in the lines, “Flowers which as in a dream at sunset I watered / faithfully not knowing how much I loved them … I looked up … all creation open to receive” (*Howl* 32). The experience of a transcended consciousness is spiritual and mystical. It is surreal and sublime. Ginsberg refers to this sort of transcendence as “natural mind … original mind, or heart-mind” (*Best Minds* 26-29). Ginsberg’s poetry was always dedicated to exploring and transcribing these states of consciousness, and the methods he utilized in his explorations are central to who he was as a poet.
BRACKETING, ASSOCIATIVE LOGIC, AND STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Portugés discusses the process necessary to achieve Ginsberg’s transcended consciousness, saying, “the artist … trains his mind to watch and record various processes of thought—without conscious manipulation. When he is successful, flashes of eternal consciousness result” (“Pater Omnipotens” 445). In order to watch and record without conscious manipulation, the poet must bracket the world. Ginsberg needed to bracket the world in order to transcribe inside mind flow—natural, honest thought—without conscious manipulation.

In transcendental phenomenology, bracketing is one aspect of the phenomenological reduction. The phenomenological reduction, according to John Cogan, is “the meditative practice … whereby one, as a phenomenologist, is able to liberate oneself from the captivation in which one is held by all that one accepts as being the case.” Robert Sokolowski defines it as “a term that signifies the ‘leading away’ from the natural targets of our concern, ‘back’ to what seems to be a more restricted viewpoint, one that simply targets the intentionalities themselves” (49). Bracketing, specifically, is to put aside “the question of the existence of the natural world around us. We thereby turn our attention, in reflection, to the structure of our own conscious experience” (Smith). For Edmund Husserl, bracketing involved the practice of detaching oneself from preconceived notions and prejudices about the existence of anything. In a sense, this is similar to Ginsberg’s sunyata in that bracketing and sunyata allow the observer (in phenomenology, the “subject”) the ability to transcend ordinary observation stifled by every memory, thought, prejudice, and notion that enters the mind. By bracketing, the
subject is able to observe phenomenon for what it is and to understand it only in the way it is experienced by the subject.

Ginsberg attempted to bracket in many ways, including “mystical illumination … the horrors of psychedelic hallucination … political and sexual experiments … the practice of mantra chanting and various forms of meditation” (Portugés, *Visionary Poetics* 43). Portugés also believes Ginsberg did this through a number of observational techniques, grounded mainly in “the phenomenological ability of observing the self observing nature.” He says, “the poet is the secretary of the consciousness and not its interpreter” (“Pater Omnipotens” 443-44). The poet must observe, record, and transcribe, but not offer analysis. This is evident in the first part of “Howl” where each “who” stanza is a recorded observation of experience. The only interpretation in the first part of the poem is the first line’s use of the phrase “best minds of my generation” (9). This line is based on the preconceived notion that these are indeed the best minds of the generation; however, the rest of the section is dedicated to transcription of observation without offering any sort of associative meaning to the reader.

For example, Ginsberg transcribes an episode of Carl Solomon’s life with bracketed, honest language:

> who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy, and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia, (*Howl* 18)
A section like this is “the ultimate phenomenological perception, in Husserl’s best sense” (Portugés, Visionary Poetics 62). In this section, the only phrase that could possibly betray a bracketed transcription is “concrete void of insulin,” but even this metaphor is imagistic in its presentation of the experience of insulin and clear in its perception of the feeling it transcribes. It does not attempt to interpret anything; instead, it transcribes the feeling as experienced by the subject. The rest of the section follows William Carlos Williams’s “imagistically observed detail” of direct transcription—phanopoeia. No context is given. No meaning is ascribed. The reader is left to connect the list of images together in a way that can produce meaning. In his annotations on the stanzas, Ginsberg offers a full page of explanations for the images, and while those explanations are important for understanding Ginsberg’s poetry on a literal level and in a social context, they offer nothing to the meaning of the feeling in the concrete imagery.

It is important to focus on the specific phenomena Ginsberg identifies in his observations. His choice of phenomena shows us his consciousness of the experience—what stood out to him most, thus communicating to us his consciousness while observing. The second stanza easily illustrates this point. He lists eight reactions by the outside world to the man who threw potato salad, and those responses range from the absurd (pingpong) to the disturbing (electricity, amnesia). By only recording his observations and not offering commentary on them or comparing them in suggestive ways, it is then up to the reader to assemble the images into a coherent meaning. Here, for example, the meaning comes through as a result of the reader’s understanding that the best minds have been destroyed by madness. The lines can be interpreted as the subject responding to the lecture on Dadaism with various Dadaist actions (throwing potato salad, shaving the
head, harlequin speech, demanding lobotomy) and then receiving cruel punishment (or a sort of Dadaist punishment with the ping pong) as a result of being misunderstood by “the granite steps of the madhouse”—an image suggesting the establishment that, clearly, the potato salad throwing inmate has rebelled against (or been defeated by).

This approach to poetics presents objective vision to induce interpreted meaning. Ginsberg thought his role as poet was to transcribe images to represent the “meanings things have in our experience” (Smith), which is a central tenet of transcendental phenomenology. Ginsberg believed this an effective strategy because “for Ginsberg, as for Whitman, the personal communicated the universal” (Stephenson 220). Specifically, transcription of perceptions can transfer conscious experience from poet to reader, thus allowing the reader to form a connection to the poet through the poet’s words, as Ginsberg explained:

[Williams] said “direct contact with external phenomenal world is the only way you can, in describing what your perception of objective reality outside of you, it’s the only way you can make a coordinate point where others can see, compare their perceptions with your perceptions.” If you describe accurately what you see outside of yourself, you will transmit your mind that way rather than try to do it by means of symbolic or rehash of esoteric symbols, but direct contact with the external world will give you a coordinate to work with other people’s perceptions You present what you perceive through your senses and others will be able to compare their own sense experience with yours, and thus you present your mind. (Best Minds 367)

This is a compelling example of the merging of phanopoeia and logopoeia. In this sense, the poet does not need to interpret imagery; the poet is only responsible for transcription, forcing the reader to perform association and interpretation. Ginsberg himself can also associate meaning from the images his spontaneous mind has selected to transcribe, allowing him to gain insight to a deeper poetic consciousness, namely the poetic mind’s
ability to induce meaning from selected imagery. This technique uses *bracketing* to achieve *interpretation*—a strategy foreign to transcendental and interpretative phenomenology.

But this strategy is even more complex than simply associating meaning from transcribed observation. This is because the strategy involves two levels of consciousness in the poet’s head: the conscious and the unconscious. The method is not Ginsberg thinking of a meaning he wishes to convey and then consciously linking images to that meaning to create a poem; the method is Ginsberg’s unconscious mind doing the work outside the control of his conscious mind. It is the mind on auto-pilot—the actual method of spontaneous composition. It is stream of consciousness realized.

Ginsberg references this in “Howl”:

> to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human<br>prose and stand before you speechless and intel-<br>ligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet con-<br>fessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head (*Howl* 20)

These lines reference Ginsberg’s fascination with the line and the breath (discussed later in this paper). The lines also imply Ginsberg’s need to transcribe his thoughts honestly. Without looking at the world honestly and without using honest language to transcribe what he saw, Ginsberg’s mythic consciousness would be unauthentic—it would not be an expression of “his naked and endless head,” and it would conform to the rhythm of the collective consciousness, not the rhythm of the transcendent consciousness. It would be a rejection of a bracketed perspective.

The need for honesty is also central to Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac’s stream of consciousness technique and the strategy of “first thought best thought.” Ginsberg’s
uncensored depiction of life—from his use of profanity, to his inclusion of sex, drug use, and other “obscene” topics, and to his uncensored transcription of his thoughts—is a product of the need for honesty. So too is his lack of punctuation and his unusual stringing together of words. Antonin Artaud believed poetry could impact a reader through disorientation (Jackson 299), and Ginsberg, a fan of Artaud’s, disoriented the reader through honest language. What he hoped to gain was “an honesty and immediacy of feeling, rather than the finish of a well-wrought work of art” (Breslin 83).

Ginsberg spoke about this a lot. He thought his poetry was an experiment that tapped “the sources of what I really felt outside literature and outside the social possibilities of communication. Funny wrinkles of my own awareness … not realizing that that is precisely the area where literature becomes literature, where writing becomes really art” (Spontaneous Mind 55). More poetically, he described the process as catching “the bird on the wing rather than [constructing] an artifact,” and he described his poetry as “primarily a record of my consciousness. The basic principle relies on spontaneous and non-revised transcription of thought forms as they arise during the time of composition” (First Thought 94). Using the spontaneous method and forgoing revision allows the poetry to communicate the immediate thought and reject the impulse to change the thought later on as a result of one thing or another, whether it be contemplation, shame, a change of mind, or bowing to societal pressure and expectation.

Another key to Ginsberg’s honest voice is the immediacy with which he presents images. Immediacy adds intensity to imagery, and this is a central technique in his presentation of feeling. Lines in “America,” “Howl,” and “Sunflower Sutra” express the immediacy of feeling best. The feeling tends to come through strongest when Ginsberg
presents thoughts without punctuation, pause, or conjunctions. The end of “Sunflower Sutra” shows this. After contemplating the sunflower for the entire poem, he ends with a declaration of immediate epiphany and feeling, brought on by the observations he has just made:

…seed & golden hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sit-down vision. (Howl 38)

Portugés says Ginsberg composed “Sunflower Sutra” in twenty minutes (Visionary Poetics 62), and the form of the poem matches the immediacy with which it was composed. It is a rush of words; an explosion of thoughts. Ginsberg described this sort of phrasing as

ellipsis in syntax—dropping of articles, connectives, sawdust of the reason—to join images as they are joined in the mind: only thus can two images connect like wires and spark … events in time perceived, giving rise to a subjective emotion, illuminating time. A deep look … Absolute relativity, that is, life. (Ginsberg, Journals 142)

The idea is to connect writing to the same speed as thought and experience. Quite simply, it is a form of economization, and it follows Artaud’s theory of disorientation of the reader. The breakdown in typical syntax rushes the eyes and gives the nouns and adjectives a feeling of spontaneous combustion, almost. A fire. A rambled pouring of emotion. It is a unique quality of Ginsberg’s poetry, and it is effective.

In “America,” he does the same thing:

America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the speeches were free everybody was angelic and sentimental about the workers it was all so sin-
In “Howl,” he does this continuously, extending images and situations out into long gasps, like a frantic sort of chant. The effect is an alarming sense of immediacy and feeling—like the feeling one gets when listening to someone who has just experienced something they have not fully processed. It is a sort of rambling rant. Ginsberg also describes this as “hot rhythm … building up like a pyramid, an emotion crying siren sound … building up to the climax where there’s a long long long line, penultimate … like a jazz mess” (Facsimile 163). The effect is startling and not unlike listening to the stream of thoughts one has when faced with immediate, intense emotion. It is not a composed voice; not an academic one. It is the voice of focused thought, unobstructed by grammar or typical linguistic regularities.

Taken in full, the effect is authenticity. Ginsberg’s immediacy stresses the idea that what we are reading are thoughts as they occur and not speech as it is thought through, dissected, revised, and then presented artificially. There is nothing to hide. The authenticity of Ginsberg’s accounts thus serves to disorient the reader, forcing the reader to reflect on the state of consciousness he or she has inhabited before reading the poem and comparing it to the consciousness being presented in the poem. This is the purpose of lines like “who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly / motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, / who blew and were blown by those human seraphim,” (Howl 13) from “Howl.” The intended effect is not necessarily shock; the intended effect is disorientation and destruction of the preconceived collective consciousness and movement into a new kind of thinking and vision.
TRANSCENDENT STRATEGIES: SURREAL JUXTAPOSITION AND GAPS

To destroy the collective American consciousness and elevate the reader and the poet to a transcended state, Ginsberg’s stream of consciousness needed to be coupled with other techniques. Chief among these were his understanding of Cézanne’s gaps in consciousness—a result of his study of Cézanne at the time (Facsimile 137)—and his interest in surreal juxtaposition, which he was interested in because of his studies of Artaud (Jackson 299). To create with words the sort of surreal sensations present in Cézanne’s work, Ginsberg believed he needed to rely on unusual and stirring juxtaposition of imagery and diction. He thought he could create “gaps” between the juxtaposed images where the reader would fill in meaning between two unlike images. Portugés describes this as an attempt “to ‘reach different parts of the mind’ that exist simultaneously and force them together to create a temporary suspension of habitual thought” (“Pater Omnipotens” 448). Ginsberg goes into further detail, saying,

I was interested in the notion of a gap between thoughts, or the gap between words as creating positive and negative holes between two thoughts through which the mind connected the disparate imagery, like lightning flash flint spark. Your mind can fill in the relationship … Your mind fills in the gap … (Best Minds 388)

Ginsberg clearly states this interest in “Howl,” laying out his purpose in detail:

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus (Howl 19-20)
This theory resulted from months of studying Cézanne and Artaud, but there was also a connection that needed to form from Ginsberg’s own mind. He found the connection in a 1955 dream about Joan Burroughs awaking from the dead. He connected his dream with “Aesthetic experience of the sublime: an experience of Time (its reality and unreality juxtaposed) (& the telescoping of Time)” (Journals 137). Immediately after transcribing the dream in his journal, he links the image of dead Joan suddenly being alive to “Cézanne’s juxtaposed planes: the foreground and also the image of the town painted in same tones (colors) despite distance between them, placed on the same plane, separated by the infinity ellipsis … between them” (137). From the dream to the canvas, he then transitions the thought to poetry, writing,

The poem as an equation (a machine), reproducing in verbal images the visual & other images of the dream … reproducing the elements which juxtaposed gave me the awe & terror & knowledge in the dream—Successfully such an ideal poem could reproduce that “petite sensation” in the reader … What is needed in a poem is a structure … of clear rational actualities put next to one another to suggest (in the eclipse of Time between the images) Eternity. The “intervals.” The gap of time … Setting up two (images) points (with a gap) separate in time and showing the distance between them. (137-38)

Ginsberg struggles to figure out a way to translate the gap in consciousness from the canvas to the poem, but he decides that the best approach is to combine “two equally strong images without editorial or rhetorical connection” (139-40) and to keep the images and the connection stark, bare, and as equal as possible without offering any sort of context to the juxtaposition. He calls the resulting space between the two images an “ellipsis of Space,” a “pun,” and an “Eclipse.” He also mentions that this sort of technique is utilized by Keats and Pound, but he differentiates from them by saying his use of the gap is “concerned with personal generalizations, or rather concretions of
personal experience” (141-42). He also describes his goal as “catching the archangel of the soul between two visual images” (*Spontaneous Mind* 248) and “the gap between the two images, the lightning in the mind” illuminated (249).

In the 1950s, Ginsberg was obsessed with the idea of gaps, and there are plenty of examples of them in *Howl and Other Poems*, but the most quoted line is “listening to the crack / of doom on the hydrogen jukebox” (*Howl* 11). The line is a prime example of Ginsberg’s use of both Husserl and Heidegger as the line itself comes about as a result of bracketed observation and elicits meaning that only makes sense in context of the outside world. In his annotations of the poem, Ginsberg shows how the gap of understanding between words is supposed to work. The bracketed observation is the transcription of the image. Ginsberg describes the term “hydrogen jukebox” as “Some end-of-the-world or apocalyptic vibration … noticed by the ‘subterraneans’ in the roaring of the jukebox, thus ‘hydrogen (bomb) jukebox’ (*Facsimile* 125). The meaning comes together when one associates the word “hydrogen” with “hydrogen bomb,” which would have been a logical association during the Cold War era. Combining that association with the “crack / of doom” that precedes the juxtaposition, the reader is unlikely to be able to bracket the image itself. Ginsberg describes this process as “a simple mechanical method of intensifying a line by unusual juxtaposition of things or concepts, ‘doctoring’ the verse” (*Facsimile* 124). The association the reader makes between the words is akin to a flash in the mind, helping the reader achieve sense consciousness. He compares his technique to “Yeats’ phrase ‘murderous innocence of the sea’ – two opposite poles reconciled in a flash of recognition” (*Facsimile* 153).
Other examples early in “Howl” are “who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear … who got busted in their pubic beards returning through / Laredo” (Howl 10). Later, he references “the machinery of other / skeletons” (13), “tubercular sky” (16), “hotrod-Golgotha” (17), “bop apocalypse” (27), and “hideous human angels” (27). These examples provide imagery without context, sometimes placing unusual or seemingly illogical distance between adjective (or noun used as adjective) and noun (as in tubercular (adj) sky (n)). They also contain meaning that the reader must form by connecting the gap between the terms to spark a “moment of perceiving an underlying order and structure of quasi-religious significance” (Jackson 304). “Bop apocalypse” is a strong example of this. In his annotation of this line, Ginsberg quotes Pythagoras: “‘When the mode of the music changes the walls of the city shake’” (Facsimile 146). The connection is between the new era of music (bop being a new form of music emphasizing improvisation and virtuosity) and the change it signals and brings about (apocalypse, perhaps defined by those perpetuating a conformist society). The connection formed, Ginsberg hoped the reader would feel the spark of understanding he intended.

But to Ginsberg, gaps did not work alone. In order to amplify their effect, Ginsberg composed his lines with an ear for mantra, mediation, and the cadence of the breath, hoping to place a sort of trance on the reader to induce transcendence of consciousness similar to what he experienced when composing.
TRANSCENDENT STRATEGIES: REPETITION, MEDITATION, DRUGS, AND STRUCTURE

Following Artaud’s theory that “poetry must impact its audience viscerally, an effect that relied heavily on the disorientation caused by mantic repetition and surreal juxtapositions” (Jackson 299), and following William Carlos Williams’s theory that poetry should follow the rhythm of everyday speech (logopoeia), Ginsberg became obsessed with the relationship between the line and the breath. He began composing his lines and inserting punctuation to match the way he thought of the lines when composing. The idea was that the “breath is ultimately the ‘director’ of an individual’s emotional pattern, that in pronouncing the words and repeating the breathing patterns the reader will experience the emotion the poet is trying to convey” (Portugés, Visionary Poetics 79).

Ginsberg believed a key to unlocking transcendent consciousness in the reader was for the reader to experience the same “‘breathing physiological spasm’” Ginsberg had experienced during his Blake visions (Visionary Poetics 78). Portugés explains how Ginsberg saw form as an extension of the presentation of his mind—another way to bracket while transcribing. The idea is that since each line starts and ends with a single thought, the form of the poem is a transcription of the form of the thought. Portugés describes this as the “finished poem [becoming] an example of the mind’s structure” (Visionary Poetics 60-61). He quotes Ginsberg explaining that the process of doing this is an exercise in concentration and meditation, as transcription of thought in both content and form relies on absolute absorption of the mind’s structure (61).

Crucial to this is the use of the long line, which Ginsberg described as a technique “to free speech for emotional expression and give it a measure to work with” (Facsimile
He refers to the long line as the strophe and says the strophe “came spontaneously as a result of the kind of feelings I was trying to put down” (Facsimile 153). During composition of “Howl,” the strophe did come naturally. Ginsberg has subsequently described his strophe style as the result of his “own neural impulses and writing impulses” and his rhythm as the result of him “working with [his] physiological movements and arriving at a pattern … organically rather than synthetically,” the pattern coming “from the breathing and the belly and the lungs” (Writers 282). This would later translate to Ginsberg’s use of meditation to compose, as he describes attention to the breath as a way to focus and “combat the hypnosis of imagery and the wanderings of the mind, which distract from present reality, present consciousness and present situation” (Spontaneous Mind 73). The lines and strophes evolve from this, thus mimicking the rhythm of actual speech (Spontaneous Mind 105).

Yet, despite his claims of authentic spontaneity, Ginsberg had been contemplating the strophe and the rhythm of the line for a long time. The actual impulse for the strophe came as a result of Ginsberg’s extensive reading and from his interactions with William Carlos Williams. In this sense, Ginsberg’s form and rhythm did not come purposefully. In fact, Ginsberg’s basic conception of poetry as an art relates to his focus on the strophe and its relationship with breath, as he defines poetry as “speech, with speech as breath from the body, instead of something to be read and counted automatically by the repetitive stress of vowels in iambic or dactylic patterns” (Spontaneous Mind 107).

Because the poem follows the movement of the breath, “Each rhythm had to rise out of a real emotion and be a living articulation of feeling, because it wasn’t repeating somebody else’s old emotion-rhythm-count” (107). Ginsberg did not stumble upon the idea of
poetry mimicking the natural breath while composing “Howl.” He learned this from Ezra Pound, but he also incorporated William Carlos Williams’s idea of a relative measure, meaning the length of the line corresponded to the breath a natural speaker uses when uttering the phrase in the line. Ginsberg was able to incorporate the relative measure with the articulation of feeling to produce a kind of melopoeia unique to him, but it was not necessarily spontaneous. Instead, the content of the strophe was spontaneous, while the strophe itself, as a rhetorical device, was subconsciously applied during composition.

Ginsberg believed he could build the rhythm of his thoughts from strophe to strophe by incorporating rising rhythmic and rhetorical power in each strophe, as he does repeatedly in “Howl,” especially in section three. Each strophe in this section starts with “I’m with you in Rockland.” The repeated line is what Ginsberg called a “fixed base”: a concept he developed from Christopher Smart’s use of repetition to anchor rhythm and reset the breath (*Facsimile* 154). Following each fixed base, there is what Ginsberg called an “answer,” where he uses imagery to respond to the “fixed base,” such as the lines, “I’m with you in Rockland / where you laugh at this invisible humor” (*Howl* 24). The fixed base/answer strophe-structure repeats through the entire section, and each verse rises in length and intensity. The first five verses in section three contain one strophe answer in response to the fixed base, the next five verses contain two strophe answers in response, and the next seven verses contain three strophe answers. This rise leads to the penultimate verse where the intensity and buildup climaxes in an eight-strophe answer before falling back to a three-strophe answer in the final verse (see Appendix 1 at the end of this paper for a visual breakdown of this structure).
Ginsberg relied on this structure to convey the rising intensity of the thoughts he was transcribing when composing. The structure does indeed mimic his thought process on a conscious level, thus making it organic. But the structure is artificial on a subconscious level because it was the result of his studies and obsession with developing a rhythm entirely based on the line. Therefore, it is not a form of true bracketed transcription; instead, it is an interpretive strategy where the poet attempts to induce a feeling through conscious manipulation.

Ginsberg repeats this strategy throughout *Howl and Other Poems*. “Howl” does this in each section. Part I uses the fixed base “who” and then the answer of imagistic strophes. Part II uses the fixed base “Moloch” and the answer of imagistic strophes, but this section is more constrained and frantic. Each strophe contains, on average, two fixed bases instead of the one he uses in the other main sections of the poem. Finally, the “Footnote to Howl” uses the fixed base of “Holy” to drive the rhythm and reset the breath. The poem also spells out what he is trying to do. The lines, “to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human / prose … to conform to the rhythm / of thought in his naked and endless head” (*Howl* 20) describe the attempts he was making at accurate thought structure transcription. “America” uses the fixed base “America,” but the usage is more sporadic than in “Howl.” The fixed base always helps reset the rhythm after a series of wandering strophes. Ginsberg takes time in the poem to address the unique quality of his structure, writing, “I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as / individual as his automobiles more so they’re / all different sexes” (*Howl* 42). “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound” utilizes the structure as well. It follows the example set in Part I of “Howl.” Ginsberg repeats the fixed base “nor” and responds with one answer strophe in each
verse. Part III returns to the fixed base structure, utilizing the phrase “it was the racks” to reset the rhythm and begin new answer tangents.

Ginsberg believed these techniques mimicked the mind better than Williams’s “little breath groups” that matched the cadence of normal speech. The main difference is the length of the breath, as Ginsberg, in his attempts to convey a frantic sentimentality, differs from William’s attempts to catch pure speech rhythm in everyday conversation. To put it another way, Ginsberg’s line is like Williams’s, but amplified. It is an amplification of the little breath group, the common speech pattern measure. He differentiates his style from Williams by explaining that “we think rapidly, in visual images as well as words, and if each successive thought were transcribed in its confusion (really its ramification) you get a slightly different prosody than if you were talking slowly” (*Facsimile* 164). His stated goal was transcription from ordinary (or bracketed thoughts), but he also clearly states his reliance on experimentation and study to develop a new form. He says, “What seems formless tho [sic] effective is really effective thru discovery or realization of rules and meanings of forms and experiments in them” (*Facsimile* 152). So again, there is the uniting of bracketed transcription with interpretive meaning; he utilizes his natural thought breath to structure the form, but the idea for the form is rooted in his understanding of past writers and theory.

It is also worth noting that the focus on the breath and the strophe is related to Ginsberg’s experimentations with drugs and meditation. While the popular assumption is that meditation brings about visionary experience, Ginsberg said that meditation brings about an understanding and communication with the breath and ordinary mind. He believed that through meditation, he would experience “a kind of eternal slowdown or
calm in spaciousness, and the phenomenal world begins to speak to you in its own detail without your imposing message on it” (First Thought 146). The ability to understand the breath and to experience phenomena without distraction allowed Ginsberg clearer access to his natural speaking and breathing patterns, thus influencing the strophes he composed.

Always related to Ginsberg’s meditative philosophy is Ginsberg’s drug philosophy. While Ginsberg initially used drugs as a way to experiment with consciousness, his use tapered off over the years as meditation became his primary experimental method. During the “Howl” years, though, Ginsberg was using drugs like peyote and LSD. Ginsberg has discussed the relationship of drugs to composition by comparing it to meditation, saying that meditation offers a calmer glimpse of a broader view while drug use offers more sensitive, detailed glimpses of specifics—what Ginsberg called “that special part of the spectrum of real high zap” (First Thought 147).

Drugs did play a large part in the composition of “Howl” (focused meditation would come later, but the idea that the strophe is a representation of the breath is a purely meditative idea). In a lengthy letter to Richard Eberhart, Ginsberg describes “Howl” as “the first discovery as far as communication of feeling and truth, that I made” (Facsimile 152) and “an ‘affirmation’ of individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity etc.” (154). The letter says much about communication, feeling, truth, God, sex, and absurdity, but it doesn’t delve much into the influence of drugs. Ginsberg does admit this, saying, “I’ve said nothing about the extraordinary influence of … drugs on the observation of rhythm and mental processes” (154). The influence certainly was extraordinary. Some of the most memorable lines in the poem are direct results of Ginsberg’s drug use. For example, the image “Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows!” (Howl 21) was
conceived while Ginsberg was on peyote (Facsimile 140), and the lines “who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty / incantations which in the yellow morning were / stanzas of gibberish” (Howl 16) are a reference to “benzedrine exhaustion all night writing experiments” (Facsimile 132).

However, he concludes that “by 1959 we had all concluded that drugs … were interesting and were useful aids, but they weren’t supreme reality” (29-30), and as the 60s commenced, Ginsberg turned fully to meditation and Buddhism as a way to explore consciousness and the breath. This was mainly because for the drugs to act as a catalyst, the user had to continually use them. Obviously, continual use has the consequence of dependence and burn out, so the productivity the drugs provided was easily exhaustible.

This is not to say that drug use did not aid in Ginsberg’s search for a new consciousness and breath in his later poetry. In fact, Ginsberg, while describing his use of LSD while writing “Wales Visitation,” argued that drug use “clarified [his] mind and left it open to get that sense of giant vast consciousness” (Firing Line). He describes how the drug allowed him to see the collective breath of nature while observing the “ocean of heaven.” This is an example of the “mystical visions and cosmic vibrations” he describes in “America” (Howl 40) or the “experience of some sort of break in the nature modality of regular thought forms and glimpse of something slightly larger” while dropping acid (Best Minds 349). Ginsberg saw drugs as a way to amplify consciousness and awareness of external stimuli (Best Minds 364). Because of this, it is possible to find drug influence in all of his early poetry. In a sense, the drug experience is akin to the child daydreaming. In “Wild Orphan,” Ginsberg explores this concept while observing a poor child walking with his mother:
And he imagines cars
and rides them in his dreams,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
to create
out of his own imagination
the beauty of his wild
forebears—a mythology
he cannot inherit.

Will he later hallucinate
his gods? (Howl 54)

Unless given specific notation that drug use was responsible for a line or an image, it is impossible to say if a line or an image was constructed with the assistance of drugs. That being said, it is clear Ginsberg viewed drugs as an aid to amplify his visionary insights—to help him hallucinate his gods.

As Ginsberg moved away from drug use, he deepened his religious studies, particularly his study of Buddhism. But even before he became interested in eastern thought, his poetry was concerned with religion and spirituality. In his letter to Eberhart, he says, “the poems are religious and I meant them to be” (Facsimile 152). Ginsberg saw his poetry during the “Howl” era as poetry concerned with religious and mystic experience, specifically in his poetry’s “realization of love” (152). The poetry is related to themes of truth and enlightenment and preoccupied with discovery of experience beyond the actual. Geoffrey Thurley describes “Howl” as an amplification of belief, saying “‘Howl’ is about people who have committed themselves irrevocably to a life of perhaps excessive spiritual intensity” (Thurley 215). The excessive spiritual intensity present in “Howl” is not related to a specific religion; instead, the intensity is focused more on a general feeling of spiritual experience.
For example, early in the poem Ginsberg references an episode where Phillip Lamantia, while reading the Koran, was suddenly transported away into “another state of awareness that seemed beyond any other state before or since experienced” (Facsimile 124). Ginsberg records the experience with clear, surreal imagery: “hollow-eyed and high sat / up smoking in the supernatural darkness of / cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities / contemplating jazz” (Howl 9). Of course, the poem contains more obvious religious imagery, including the “Mohammedan angels staggering on tene- / ment roofs illuminated” (9), visions of eternity (17), and allusions to Christ and his last words on the cross (20). This last allusion speaks to Stephen Prothero’s thesis “that the beats were spiritual protesters … [protesting] against what the beats perceived as the moribund orthodoxies of 1950s America” (208). Ginsberg defines his protest in the form of metaphor, describing jazz musicians as Christ incarnate, writing, “rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in / the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the / suffering of America’s naked mind for love into / an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone / cry” (20). Prothero explains that the poem represents the Beats inability to “make sense of God’s apparent exodus from the world” (Prothero 209) and the focus on the lives of “whores and junkies, hobos and jazzmen never ceased to be a search for something to believe in, something to go by” (210).

Though Ginsberg utilized Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Zen in this poetry, Prothero points out that Ginsberg (and the other Beats) “were champions of spiritual experience over theological formulations” (220). Their poetry was not promotion of dogmatic belief or even faith in a religious system; it was merely a celebration of transcendence, and for Ginsberg, transcending actual consciousness was
the best way to escape the wickedness of the world that he saw in America, in the Cold
War, and in the bomb.

Put all together, drug use and meditation were both used as attempts to better
understand the individual consciousness and to connect with the natural breath. These
methods were used to produce a more natural poetry through spontaneous composition.
The contradiction here is that everything produced on the page was the result of both
spontaneous feeling and learned and practiced ways of producing and transcribing
spontaneous feeling. It is a blatant contradiction, but such is Ginsberg.

“Do I contradict myself? Very well. I contradict myself. I am large. I contain
multitudes.”

FROM “HOWL” TO DEATH AND FAME

Most criticism about Ginsberg focuses on the poems in Howl and Kaddish. There has
been very little written about what came after. Instead, to Ginsberg’s lament, critical
attention has fixated on what Ginsberg did beyond his poetry as a social figure and
activist. In 1985, he complained,

Generally (the reviews have been about) either the history or the historical
significance or the persona of the author, after many years of complaint
that the persona of the author has gotten in the way of the
poetry, finally when presented with nothing but the poetry, nobody is
paying attention to it. (Abrams)

Ginsberg was not wrong about this. In an article shortly after his death, Ginsberg’s “arch
enemy” Norman Podhoretz commented on the poet’s legacy, saying, “As a poet, he never
grew or developed … even most of his admirers think that nothing he wrote after 1959
was as good as ‘Howl’ and ‘Kaddish’” (Podhoretz). Podhoretz’s dismissiveness aside, the
statement is reflected in the scholarship as a simple search in any database on Ginsberg will redirect to articles and books written either about “Howl” or his life. In fact, it seems that aside from Paul Portugés’s work, the only dedicated books focused on Ginsberg’s poetic philosophy beyond “Howl” are either compiled interviews or works Ginsberg put together himself. Despite his wishes, his legacy, for most people, starts and ends with “Howl” and the Beat Generation.

It is true that throughout the monstrous *Collected Poems 1947-1997*, the strongest moments of Ginsberg’s career are during the “Howl” years. This may be mostly because Ginsberg published a lot of poems, so there is more than is needed in the volume, but to dismiss the rest of Ginsberg’s work is foolish and short sighted. In fact, what is most interesting about Ginsberg’s entire collection is the evolution he went through over time. Even though his work after 1960 (and especially after 1970) changed considerably, there are still lightning moments of illumination and poetic prowess to be found.

To a degree, Ginsberg’s poetry after *Kaddish* and especially into the last two decades of his life abandons some of the earlier concepts he relied on in the 1950s. While the obsession with Cézanne’s gaps of consciousness and the use of surreal juxtaposition mostly fade away, the lessons learned from William Carlos Williams persist. The poetry is still highly imagistic with almost religious dedication to phanopoeia. Some poems are simply long lists of images described with mystic adjectives and presented sometimes in the kind of detail one would find in a modern realism novel. Ginsberg also continued to follow Williams’s advice about including jumps from one state of experience to another, typically without any sense of transition and typically near the end of the poem. “First Party at Ken Kesey’s with Hell’s Angels” (1965) is a good example of this, as Ginsberg
spends the first seventeen lines of the poem describing the visual aspects of the scene in
detail and in two very long sentences. He uses his economized voice, running objects
together without use of articles or prepositions, and he does not offer commentary on the
images he presents: for example, “the blast of loudspeakers / hi-fi Rolling Stones Ray
Charles Beatles / Jumping Joe Jackson and twenty youths / dancing to the vibration in the
floor” (Ginsberg, Collected Poems 382). But at the end, the jump occurs suddenly from
“children sleeping softly in their bedroom bunks” to the next lines, “And 4 police cars
parked outside the painted / gate, red lights revolving in the leaves” (382).

Another later poem utilizing the sudden shift is “After Antipater” (1985). This
poem spends the first fourteen lines listing public things the poet has done in known
places, from “sat on gray columns broken at Acropolis’ marble sill” to “Stood in Red
Square snow across from the Kremlin wall-tomb of th’- / assassin of millions,” then
pivots in the last two lines to the personal reflection “But when you lay on my bed, white
sheet covering your loins, your eyes / on mine / I forget these marvels, my heart breathed
open, I saw life’s glory look / back at me naked” (Collected Poems 921). It is a beautiful
love poem that utilizes Williams’s focus on the object itself juxtaposed with the
individual thought to produce an expansion of understanding at the end. The extended use
of phanopoeia brings the reader into the concrete world in an imagistic way, and the use
of fragmented pieces of memory adds a post-modern realism to the presentation of
thought.

The same sort of techniques litter one of Ginsberg’s favorite poems, “Wichita
Vortex Sutra” (1966). The poem reads like the transcription of a descriptive explanation
by a tour guide. Ginsberg opens the poem without much punctuation or connecting
words, letting the line and the breath dictate the way the poem is read: “Red sun setting flat plains west streaked / with gauzy veils, chimney mist spread / around Christmas-tree-bulbed refineries—aluminum / white tanks squat beneath / winking signal towers’ bright plane-lights” (Collected Poems 402). The lines are written with attention to the ear, and when Ginsberg reads them aloud, the rhythm flows naturally, just as he intends. In Ginsberg’s recorded version of the poem with Philip Glass, he begins reading halfway through the poem and instantly brings immediacy to the lines with the way he drops his voice and elongates the second syllable of each foot, reading in an emphasized iambic rhythm. His use of long e’s adds a repetitive structure and assonance to each line: “Not the empty sky that hides / the feeling from our faces … between our eyes & bellies, yes” (413). The melopoeia is in the assonance and in the power of the voice reading. Because the breath lines follow a natural cadence, the effect combined with the imagery in the lines creates an atmosphere like a vortex, spinning and overloaded the way phenomena spins and overloads the senses while driving fast and unencumbered, as Ginsberg was when he wrote the poem.

There is also a considerable amount of internal rhyme that his voice stresses aloud: “the bodylove emanating in a glow of beloved skin, / white smooth abdomen down to the hair” (413). And when he gets to the naming of gods and their descriptions, the lines feel like the fixed bases and strophes in “Howl”: “Shambu Bharti Baba naked covered with ash / Khaki Baba fat-bellied mad with the dogs / Dehorahava Baba who moans Oh how wounded, How wounded / Sitaram Onkar Das Thakur who commands / give up your desire” (414). Combined with the phanopoeia imagistic style and the voice of the poet, the lines take on a hypnotic effect, and Ginsberg proclaims it a chant,
shouting, “I lift my voice aloud, / make Mantra of American language now, / I here declare the end of the War! / Ancient days’ Illusion!— / and pronounce words beginning my own millennium” (415). Being such an important poem to Ginsberg and one of his most striking, it is strange that the poem has not received more critical attention. The poem presents Ginsberg’s concerns just as accurately as “Howl,” and they signal a shift to a deeper understanding of existence than Ginsberg had in 1956. The poem certainly contains social context, but it is more obviously concerned with the experience of experience and the workings of the mind.

The poem is difficult to follow when reading silently, but aloud it takes on a strong musical quality, and Ginsberg’s reading pushes the melopoeia to the surface, like in lines like “Napalm and black clouds emerging in newsprint / Flesh soft as a Kansas girl’s / ripped open by metal explosion” (410). The lines mostly follow an amphibrachic meter with trochees bracketing the opening simile, and the imagery is purely imagistic. This is also a later example of heavy juxtaposition, as the soft flesh is juxtaposed with the metal explosion, creating a lightning moment of realization and understanding once the two clear and strong images are read together. The balance between each image is sharply contrasted by the opposing images, and by separating the images with the harsh verb “ripped,” the metaphorical image takes on new weight, becoming cruel and inspiring the logopoeia of understanding, shock, and anger.

The effect in this poem is similar to the effect in “Howl.” The long line, long stanza, and free verse style with varying rhythmic breaths push the imagistic descriptions forward in an attempt to bring about the logopoeia. That the poem takes on strong political themes is consistent with Ginsberg’s claims that his poetry transcribes his inside-
mind-thought, as he said in 1985, "I'm not so much interested in politics as I am in my mind, i.e. making a graph or a picture of my mind over the seasons, months, years, decades … So the subject is how does politics get me upset or … how does poetry turn me on?" (Abrams). Because Ginsberg’s attentions turned so much to politics and mantra as he got older, so too did his poetry.

Another 1960s’ poem that is particularly strong is “Wales Visitation” (1967), written on LSD. Again, the poem follows the long line structure and adheres to a strong mixture of personal thought and imagistic description, with the descriptions always being honest transcriptions from a mind clearly belonging to Ginsberg, as in the description “I lay down mixing my beard with the wet hair of the mountainside, / smelling the brown vagina-moist ground, harmless, / tasting the violet thistle-hair, sweetness—” (Collected Poems 489). The poem attempts to locate the self within nature. It is a mix of Buddhist meditation, drug use, and Romantic fascination with sublime nature. Ginsberg names Blake and Wordsworth early in the poem, positioning the poem as a companion to “Tintern Abbey,” then applies his own sensibilities to connect the poet to the past and to nature. Lines like “Heaven balanced on a grassblade. / Roar of the mountain wind slow, sigh of the body, / One Being on the mountainside stirring gently / Exquisite scales trembling everywhere in balance,” “Groan thru breast and neck, a great Oh! to earth heart / Calling our Presence together,” and “Heaven breath and my own symmetric” (Collected Poems 489-90) call attention to the poem’s fascination with oneness and balance. This is similar to the 1973 poem “Who,” where Ginsberg muses on his Blake vision and declares, “I realized entire Universe was manifestation of One Mind” (Collected Poems 603). “Wales Visitation” is also a profound example of Ginsberg’s intentional merging of
drugs and meditation to create a reflective mind hyper-focused on phenomena. The poem shows patience, peace, and attraction to the natural world, and it is an extremely effective example of avant-garde descriptive imagery with unique, powerful images like “rain-mist curtains wave through the bearded vale” (490).

Most of Ginsberg’s poetry post-“Howl” is concerned primarily with his focus on the rolling feeling of the breath, and “Wales Visitation,” just like “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” follows that focus. But perhaps Ginsberg’s strongest poem post-1960 is “Plutonian Ode” (1978). The poem is perhaps the closest he got to replicating the hypnotic strophes of “Howl,” and its imagery and political message is presented metaphorically, through allusion, in post-modern fragments, and in clear imagistic detail. The poem is his late masterpiece, a cerebral presentation of the breath, and powerful in its ability to return to the classical ode structure while pushing the form into a Whitman-like spiral. The poem, as usual with Ginsberg, is at its best when read aloud, as each line corresponds to Ginsberg’s natural spoken breath. Part II of the poem, specifically, follows the breaths perfectly, with each line rising as Ginsberg’s breath runs out. The poem becomes almost frantic in this section, economizing sharply and placing the lines in real physical locations, as Ginsberg commonly did. The last lines of the section, in particular, are striking in their combination of phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia:

Completed as yellow hazed dawn clouds brighten East, Denver city white below
Blue sky transparent rising empty deep & spacious to a morning star
High over the balcony
above some autos sat with wheels to curb downhill from Flatiron’s jagged pine ridge,
sunlit mount meadows sloped to rust-red sandstone cliffs above brick townhouse roofs
as sparrows waked whistling through Marine Street’s summer green leafed tree. (Collected Poems 712)
The lines are not exactly syllabic, but taken as breath couplets, each pair offers close to twenty syllables and two full breaths. The first line of the couplet is a drawn-out breath with strong imagery, and the second line is a short breath to punctuate the thought, using mostly simpler vocabulary and fewer poetic effects. Punctuation is also dropped in favor of natural, juxtaposed rhythms. The effect shows that even twenty years after “Howl,” Ginsberg was still utilizing melopoeia and the natural speech cadence he learned from Williams, while continuing to expand his imagery, pacing, and line length in an expansion of Whitman’s breath.

Ginsberg has many poems specifically about the breath, as well. Some of his poems were written in accordance to meditative breath. These poems include “Thoughts Sitting Breathing” (1973), which was put to music (something Ginsberg did more and more as he got older). In this poem, Ginsberg utilizes fixed bases, using chanting sounds like “OM” to establish a new base, producing a heavy dose of melopoeia. “Yes and It’s Hopeless” (1973) again uses the fixed base (this time the word ‘hopeless’) to establish the beginning of a new breath. “Thoughts on a Breath” (1974) does not include a fixed base, but it does utilize line length to establish breaths, similar to “Plutonian Ode.” “Thoughts Sitting Breathing II” (1982) follows “Thoughts Sitting Breathing,” but this time there is no fixed base. Instead, the poem uses long lines to list a mixture of thought and object with few conjunctions between nouns. Though the lines may seem frantic, the poem’s tone is meditative and light. “Cosmopolitan Greetings” (1986) presents one-line breath mantras following natural cadence. Each breath line expresses an aspect of Ginsberg’s philosophy, most of which should be familiar to a reader acquainted with his work. There are lines like “Absolutes are coercion,” “Ordinary mind includes eternal perceptions,”
“Observe what’s vivid,” “We are observer, measuring instrument, eye, subject, Person,”

“Inside skull vast as outside skull,” “Syntax condensed, sound is solid,” “Intense
fragments of spoken idiom, best,” and “Candor ends paranoia” (Collected Poems 955).

Finally, “Five A.M.” (1996), one of Ginsberg’s last poems, speaks about the breath
through the use of breath lines: “Breath transmitted into words / Transmitted back to
breath … / … cadenced breathing—beyond time, clocks, empires, bodies, cars.” The
poem then asks where the poetic breath comes from, and it offers no answers, concluding
Zen-like: “Where does it come from, where does it go forever?” (Collected Poems 1100).

The contemplation and non-answer is similar to an early poem, “Fragment 1956” (1956).

The poem opens with Ginsberg’s declaration of poetry’s purpose:

sing holily the natural pathos of the human soul,
naked original skin beneath our dreams
& robes of thought, the perfect self identity
radiant with lusts and intellectual faces
Who carries the lines, the painful browed
contortions of the upper eyes, the whole body
breathing and sentient among flowers and buildings
open-eyed, self-knowing, trembling with love— (Collected Poems 157)

All of these poems share the same fascination with the breath and with the presentation of
the breath; they all follow the rhythmic quality Ginsberg was attempting to create; and
they all present honest transcriptions of the poet’s mind thoughts, exactly as Ginsberg
believed poetry should do. They represent the vast, ambitious goal of Ginsberg’s work:
the ability for poetry to transcend itself and become a vessel to transport consciousness
from one stage to the next. By focusing on the breath, Ginsberg was attempting to
produce meditative poetry that could, if read properly, create the effect of awareness of
self simply through the reproduction and identification with a common rhythm.
One last thing should be noted about Ginsberg’s later poetry, and that is his presentation of sexuality. Ginsberg did not wish to be defined by one aspect of his being, so though he was open and proud of his homosexuality, he did not want to be known as a gay poet. Instead, he wished for his sexuality to be a part of his poetry because it was a part of his life and his thoughts, just as everything else he wrote of. It is worth noting, however, that Ginsberg’s sexual poems spanned his entire career, and despite the objections of many conservative critics, his sexual poetry is as beautiful and poetic as any classical love poems. His sexual poems also stay consistent to Ginsberg’s use of the line breath, honest transcription, and imagistic presentation.

But Ginsberg’s uncensored mind has been the subject of much popular rejection. Norman Podhoretz captured what most of Ginsberg’s critics feel about his sexual verse when he wrote,

Yet so far as I have been able to determine, no one thought to draw a connection between the emergence of AIDS and the rampant homosexual promiscuity promoted by Ginsberg (with buggery as an especially “joyful” feature that is described in loving detail in poem after pornographic—yes, pornographic—poem). (Podhoretz)

Podhoretz’s attack stems from his focus on “Howl” and its depiction of anal sex, but despite his inaccurate (and, frankly, bigoted) view of Ginsberg’s purpose, the love poems are just as valid expressions of the mind as the political poems, and they are, on technical and emotion levels, just as worthy of critical analysis as Ginsberg’s other work. In regard to Podhoretz’s criticism, two love poems specifically come to mind. “Please Master” (1968) is mostly a straight forward description of submissive sexual pleasure. “C’mon Jack” (1976) is a musical, almost syllabic poem focused on sexual banter. Besides those two poems, no other poem in the collection presents sex in such an explicit way as its
entire focus. From a surface level reading, it is tempting to describe these two poems as pornographic, but in keeping with Ginsberg’s philosophy, they are no more than honest portrayals of sexual desire in its basest form. After all, Ginsberg has a number of poems in his final collection that focus on excrement, snot, and urine. Everything he wrote was designed to present actual life and actual thought, even if that meant honest transcriptions of the taboo.

While those two poems may not necessarily be Ginsberg at his technical best, there are two exceptional poems about homosexual sex and love that are presented with very tender, vulnerable imagery and tone. “Many Loves” (1956) is one of Ginsberg’s best poems. It describes a sexual encounter with Neal Cassady. The poem starts explicitly and honestly: “Neal Cassady was my animal: he brought me to my knees / and taught me the love of his cock and the secrets of his mind” (Collected Poems 165), but then the poem presents a detailed description of both the physical and the emotional encounter when Cassady slept next to Ginsberg on a cot. The lines are long and intended to be read slowly, the descriptions are unusually metaphorical for Ginsberg, and there is no rush or economization. It is an exercise in form meeting content: a tender form married to a tender experience. And yet, Ginsberg manages to keep the poem light, as he often did, through his use of humor. It is a unique poem where lines like “Thenceforth open to his nature as a flower in the shining sun” stand toe to toe with lines like “O ass of mystery and night! ass of gymnasiums and muscular pants” (Collected Poems 164-65). It might be tempting to see the opposing lines as examples of juxtaposition for consciousness’s sake, but it is perhaps more accurate to describe them simply as spontaneous thoughts brought on by memory.
The companion poem to “Many Loves” may very well be “On Neal’s Ashes” (1968). Whereas the former is confessional, romantic, and almost an ode with long Whitmanian lines and layered metaphors, the latter is an eight-line poem, heavily economized, and heavy on nouns. The poem is a lament with half of the lines ending in ‘ash,” and the rhythm of the breath lines flows in an elegiac way. Yet, even in elegy, the lines are as honest as any in the sexual poems, with lines like “youthful cock tip, / curly pubis / breast warmth, / man palm, / high school thigh, / baseball bicept arm, asshole anneal’d to silken skin” (Collected Poems 513). The poem, contrasted with “Many Loves,” is an excellent example of the tenderness and sensitivity in Ginsberg’s poetry, even in the midst of spontaneous composition. That is something that prevails from 1947 to 1997, in all of his work. Even when he was supercharged and fuming, railing at everything in the world he thought Moloch, there was beneath the poetry a reverence for the holy world, the hope that the world and humanity could one day find sympathy, and the many loves of the multitudinous man.

A NEW LEGACY

Allen Ginsberg was a poet who wished to explore new forms of consciousness, and he did this through a variety of strategies. He used repetitive strophes and fixed bases to create a rhythm that mimicked the mind, he used surreal juxtaposition to create “gaps” in consciousness, he utilized imagistic principles of phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia, and he used honest, transcribed, bracketed language and imagery to transcend established cultural consciousness and break through the taboo of unspoken personal experience. Through these strategies, Ginsberg created a poetic form dedicated to the
phenomenological contradiction of transcription of bracketed thought to produce non-bracketed interpreted meaning.

Ginsberg’s verse contains a form that combines Imagism, Surrealism, modernism, the avant-garde, Impressionism, Romanticism, jazz, confessional poetry, and stream of consciousness. Blended together, the form is a new sort of post-modern presentation of the mind with all its fragments and multitudes presented simultaneously in a way that might not be natural for the page. T.S. Eliot once argued that the poet is made up of the ghosts of past artists, yet the poet moves beyond the past by incorporating it and altering it in his own poetry. Allen Ginsberg is this concept embodied. Ginsberg took all the lessons from his mentors and incorporated them into something new—into a new poetry of realistic hyper-awareness of thought and experience. He took the surrealists’ juxtaposition, the post-Impressionists’ Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus, the Romantics’ attempts at common language in poetry, the imagists’ fascination with the image to form meaning, the modernists’ mantra of “make it new,” the confessional nature of personal expression, post-modern fragmentation, avant-garde psychedelia, and the jazz method of spontaneous movement, and he blended them all together into a modern American voice. His is a voice defined by the past and the present, both reflective and progressive, uncensored and truer to actual mind thought than anything before it, for better or worse.

It is easy to read Ginsberg and be swept away by the power of the voice—by the raw strength of his expression and by the explicit portrayal of uncanny truths and taboo subject matter, or to be shocked by his candor. It is easy to focus on the content and miss the spiritual, technical, and rhythmic effects his verse has on the ear and the soul. And it is easy to miss the attempts his poetry makes to transcend regular conceptions of mental
presentation. The imagery’s spectacle and Ginsberg’s aura as mythologized mystic can easily blot out the subtle spiritual strategies in the text itself. And it is easy to take the popular opinion “that ‘beatnik’ meant angry at the world rather than weeping at the world” (*Best Minds* 51), or to see Ginsberg’s use of drugs, promiscuity, and generally unacceptable public behavior as poisonous or destructive. Popular responses to Ginsberg have fallen into this trap. Critical voices have too. Podhoretz exemplifies this response when says, “Kerouac and Ginsberg once played a part in ruining a great many young people who were influenced by their ‘distaste for normal life and common decency’” (Podhoretz). But this view is short sighted and superficial. It fails to consider the many multitudes that make up a human being and a poet, and it is a dishonest way of seeing the world because Ginsberg’s poetics focus on experience itself, good and bad, and to say that presentation or exploration of the bad is akin to ruin is nothing short of ego.

It is time to reexamine Ginsberg’s method and the dedication to craft present in his poems. It is time to see Ginsberg philosophically and spiritually; time to see and understand the ways he defined consciousness, diagnosed consciousness, transcribed consciousness, and manipulated consciousness. It is time to see how he took on the role of transcendental phenomenologist to identify and describe the world as defined by conscious experience, and it is time to see how he composed in a way that allowed the reader to interpret consciousness from transcription.

Phillip Lopate wrote of “Howl”:

Ginsberg himself was something of a detached observer, more stable than the others, portraying clearly though with sympathy the screw-ups of those around him, even envying them their loss of control, yet in his own way being cautionary, undeceived by their pitiable attempts to rationalize all that insane behavior. (90)
Though Lopate is somewhat misguided in his judgement of Ginsberg’s fellow Beats and in his assessment that Ginsberg was detached and undeceived, he is correct in noting Ginsberg as the observer and portrayer of his generation. After all, Ginsberg survived, lasting long enough to teach future generations about the Beats and to compile and record lectures, manuscripts, observations, and recordings. He became the steward of the generation. But Ginsberg’s phenomenological observations were more attached to the Beats than Lopate gives him credit for. Ginsberg’s study of different conscious states, his experimentation with poetry, politics, drugs, sex, and observation, and his fascination with the spiritual aspect of poetry and thought put him squarely in the middle of Beat exploration. After all, “It wasn’t a political or a social rebellion” (*Best Minds* 26); instead, Ginsberg and his cohorts had notions that if they “could arrive at some condition of total sensory openness … then there would be a simultaneity of noticing of detail, some kind of scheme or web that would approximate visionary coherence. So [they] had some primitive notions like that, of total illumination” (29). Ginsberg was very much in the thick of it.

Lopate’s article echoes other popular misconceptions. It focuses on the social aspect—the rebellion aspect. It does not mention the exploration of consciousness. It does not mention the fascination with mantra, repetition, and meditation. And it does not touch on the heart of the Beat movement or Ginsberg’s primary obsession with consciousness, the soul, the mind, the heart, and the human experience. This is because Lopate focuses too much on “Howl” and not enough on the full body of work, just as most other critics have done.
“Improvisation in Beijing” (1984) would be a better place than “Howl” to find the whole of Ginsberg’s obsessions and to define what his legacy as a poet should be. In this poem, he lists three pages of reasons why he writes. It should be the poem that defines Ginsberg’s life; the one scholars look to in order to understand what he was trying to accomplish in his work, how he incorporated various poetic philosophies, and why his work matters. Some of the reasons Ginsberg lists should be familiar, as most of them relate to his mentors and what they taught him: “I want to breathe freely,” “to speak with candor,” with “unobstructed breath,” with “vernacular idiom,” with “word pictures,” to “look at … thoughts as part of external phenomenal world,” to “reveal my thoughts, cure my paranoia also other people’s paranoia,” and “to make accurate picture of my own mind.” And then there are his mantras: “’First thought, best thought’ always,” “minute particulars,” and “’No ideas but in things.” And finally, he speaks to the inability to truly define a poet as one thing: as a Beat, or as a gay poet, or as a drug advocate, or a prophet, or a hippie, or an anti-war activist, or a Buddhist, or a man sometimes taken by the throes of mania. He speaks to the multitudes of the human spirit:

… Walt Whitman said, ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself (I am large, I contain multitudes.)’

I write poetry because my mind contradicts itself, one minute in New York, next minute the Dinaric Alps.
I write poetry because my head contains 10,000 thoughts.
I write poetry because no reason no because.
I write poetry because it’s the best way to say everything in mind within 6 minutes or a lifetime. (Collected Poems 937-39)

Ginsberg’s assessment of why he writes and of the important aspects of poetry says everything about how his work should be remembered and about why it deserves more consideration and scholarship. Because within the poem’s lines is a textbook on how
poetic influence spurs change in verse and how a poet can take heed of Pound’s assertion to “make it new” and Eliot’s idea that talent and tradition push poetry forward to new realms. Ginsberg’s poem speaks to the juxtaposition of a multitude of 20th-century philosophies, melting each school of thought into a distinctly American rhythm, voice, and belief system. The idea is to merge the concepts learned in the modernist era into the concepts being explored during the post-modern era. What results is a new kind of verse, located within its historical moment but flexible enough to evolve over time. That only two of Ginsberg’s poems are deemed deserving of extensive scholarship ignores Ginsberg as an essential cog in the turning machine of American poetry. It is time to reevaluate Ginsberg beyond “Howl” and beyond the popular image. It is time to delve deeper into his work. It is time to recognize the entire scope of his poetry as worthy of inclusion in the canon of essential American verse and as a crucial contribution to the continuing maturity of the American artistic voice.
References


Bibliography


Hunsberger, Bruce. “Kit Smart’s ‘Howl.’” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, Winter-Spring 1965, pp. 34-44.


Appendix A

Below is part III of “Howl.” I have labeled the initial fixed base then marked each subsequent fixed base with *italics*. I have labeled the initial answer then marked each subsequent answer in *bracketed italics*. Each line can be considered a strophe, and each fixed base marks the beginning of a new verse. I have also labeled the number of answer strophes to show how the number increases so as to increase the intensity of the emotion and the breath. All of my comments are in parentheses.

*Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland* (Fixed base minus “Carl Solomon!” going forward)

(1) [*where you’re madder than I am*] (Answer)

I’m with you in Rockland

(2) [*where you must feel very strange*]

I’m with you in Rockland

(3) [*where you imitate the shade of my mother*]

I’m with you in Rockland

(4) [*where you’ve murdered your twelve secretaries*]

I’m with you in Rockland

(5) [*where you laugh at this invisible humor*] (End one line answers)

I’m with you in Rockland

(1) [*where we are great writers on the same dreadful*] (Begin two line answers)

[typewriter]

I’m with you in Rockland
(2) [where your condition has become serious and is reported on the radio]

I’m with you in Rockland

(3) [where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses]

I’m with you in Rockland

(4) [where you drink the tea of the breasts of the spinsters of Utica]

I’m with you in Rockland

(5) [where you pun on the bodies of your nurses the harpies of the Bronx] (End two line answers)

I’m with you in Rockland

(1) [where you scream in a straightjacket that you’re] (Begin three line answers)

[losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss]

I’m with you in Rockland

(2) [where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse]

I’m with you in Rockland

(3) [where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void]
I’m with you in Rockland

(4) [where you accuse your doctors of insanity and
plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the
fascist national Golgotha]

I’m with you in Rockland

(5) [where you will split the heavens of Long Island
and resurrect your living human Jesus from the
superhuman tomb]

I’m with you in Rockland

(6) [where there are twentyfive thousand mad com
rades all together singing the final stanzas of
the Internationale]

I’m with you in Rockland

(7) [where we hug and kiss the United States under
our bedsheets the United States that coughs all
night and won’t let us sleep]

I’m with you in Rockland

[where we wake up electrified out of the coma] (Penultimate answer (climax) with eight
lines)

[by our own souls’ airplanes roaring over the
roof they’ve come to drop angelic bombs the
hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls col
lapse  O skinny legions run outside  O starry-

] (Ginsberg describes this section as rising cries)

[spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is

here  O victory forget your underwear we’re free]

I’m with you in Rockland

[in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-

] (Coda answer, back to three lines)

[journey on the highway across America in tears

to the door of my cottage in the Western night]

(Howl 24-26)