

‘Mind is shapely, Art is shapely’: The Intuitive Poetics of Allen Ginsberg

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The works of Jack Kerouac and of Allen Ginsberg accommodate a plethora of literary techniques that aim at achieving forms of writing that are properly countercultural; ways of writing in defiance of an environment conceived as largely inimical for radical selfhood, but also intrinsically mystical. Their aesthetic strategies give emphasis to a crucial performativity in the texts: they offer new opportunities, both in and *through* the writing, to transcend the multiple principles of alienation articulated by the cultural environment of post-war America, which they saw as largely detrimental and even threatening for the creative self.

In his road novels, Kerouac’s autodiegetic narration endorses an intrinsic form of self-discovery which is implemented by means of a relentless flux of consciousness that drives a highly energetic flow into the prose; a flow through which the writer seeks to channel his ownmost and innermost thoughts, insights, and affects of the moment as immediately as possible and with the fewest restraints. Frequently referred to as “spontaneous prose,” this method of composition was developed by Kerouac *and* by Ginsberg at the turn of the 1950s. According to Paul Portugés, Kerouac, as “tutor-in-prosody and the originator of the idea of spontaneous writing,...was insisting that Ginsberg abandon his academic training that led him to compose over-written stanzas based on the notion of autonomous art forms.”¹

The recourse to the spontaneous form is nothing new in the artistic and literary culture of the twentieth century. It has been put to use by a myriad of avant-garde movements, in

¹ Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1978), pp. 56–57.

different ways and for various purposes—from Dadaism to Surrealism and from Lettrism to Abstract Expressionism—and would later constitute a key component of New American Poetry, of Situationism, and of the punk movement in the second part of the century.² It took the form of sound poetry, of early cut-ups and collages, of automatic writing, of projective verse, of action painting, of drifting (“la dérive”), among others; experimental ploys and devices that actively shaped the foundations of their respective movements by bringing into prominence, in each instance, a radical brand of self-expression.

In the context of Beat literature, and especially for those writers situated in a post-Romantic lineage such as Ginsberg and Kerouac, the spontaneous was viewed as the manifestation of a form of innocence that conveyed a sense of truthfulness; finding expression through accidental occurrences whose arbitrary arrangement was thought to possess a moral value. It was perceived as a modality that was fundamentally organic, in accordance with the laws of nature and of spirit, and carrying an intrinsic form of authenticity—an authenticity that resonated vigorously in the context of the 1950s in North America. The spontaneous attitude was devised by the Beats as a key component of a form of being that epitomized the liberty of the self; a form of being, subversive by its very nature, with the potential to loosen the grip of the status quo on both an individual and collective level.

Applied to writing, such a method implies the suppression of the revising process. As Ginsberg insisted,

... anything that the mind passes through is proper and shouldn't be revised out, almost anything that passes through mind, anything with the exception of self-consciousness.

² See Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Anything that occurs to the mind is the proper subject. So if you are making a graph of the movements of the mind, there is no point in revising it. Because then you would obliterate the actual markings on the graph.³

This spontaneity in the writing pivots on a language which is particularly visual, in tight connection with the images reflected in the deeper self: a language that enables the writing to be driven almost exclusively by the spontaneous mind of the author, and which, in consequence, demands a high degree of linguistic flexibility. As Ginsberg declared:

Speak now, or ever hold your peace, write whatever comes to mind, adding vowels, adding alluvials, adding to the end of the sentence, and then rather than revising, if you have a new thought, go on to articulate it in the next sentence.⁴

The syntactical freedom that Ginsberg advocates here is highly strategic: it enhances radical self-expression by allowing the whole range of phonemes, neologisms, and other linguistic conversions into the prosody, overwriting some of the most basic rules of the English syntax for the sake of the most faithful report of the event *as it occurs in the mind*. Indexed on the fugacious movements of consciousness, this language is self-determining for the most part: its primary function is to relay verbatim the writer's most singular perceptions of his or her own world, recording their nature, their energy but also their impact on the self at any given moment. As implemented by Ginsberg in his long poem "Howl" (1956):

³ Allen Ginsberg, "Craft Interview with Allen Ginsberg" [1971], Interview with Mary Jane Fortunato, Lucille Medwick, and Susan Rowe, in *Allen Ginsberg: Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interview, 1958–1996*, ed. by David Carter, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 245–58 (pp. 251–52). Nevertheless, Ginsberg admitted to arranging minor details to finalize his poems.

⁴ Ginsberg, "Early Poetic Community" [1971], Interview with Robert Duncan, in *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, ed. by Gordon Ball (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 131–50 (p. 144).

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind.⁵

On a structural level, this long line may be viewed as the materialization in poetical form of Ginsberg's spontaneous mind in full action. The free association of disparate phrasal units is governed by the extemporization of the poet's thoughts that flash through his mind in real time. It makes for an incongruous string of syntactical combinations and rhythmic patterns, such as “storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light” or the alliterative “kind king light of mind,” which give rise to a series of images that are profoundly peculiar if not surreal.⁶ In turn, these images have the capacity to generate meanings that have possibly never been articulated before—meanings potentially *new*, emerging from the writer's innermost and ownmost self and bearing the distinctive marks of his or her selfhood.

The spontaneous modality at the core of such a method of composition is key for Ginsberg's poetry, because it pertains to the transcription of the transcendental and the mystical: it articulates a sense of truthfulness that is both intimate and universal and which is associated with the intuition of a higher form of consciousness. As Ginsberg reflected on his poetical practice:

Usually during the composition, step by step, word by word and adjective by adjective, if it's all spontaneous, I don't know whether it even makes sense sometimes. Sometimes

⁵ Ginsberg, “Howl” [1956], in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*. Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 1–13 (p. 2).

⁶ *Ibid.*

I do know it makes complete sense, and I start crying. Because I realize I'm hitting some area which is absolutely true. And in that sense applicable universally, or understandable universally....In that sense prophecy, because it touches a common key....It's that you know and feel something which somebody knows and feels in a hundred years.⁷

What Ginsberg refers to as “some area which is absolutely true” corresponds to a space in his mind which is able to accommodate, simultaneously, a higher form of consciousness, intemporal and ubiquitous, which is thought to be that of the universal mind;⁸ a space, emotionally invested, which consecrates the radical *vision* of the immediate holiness of all things in existence, now and forever.

The modality of the spontaneous, crucially, is what enables Ginsberg to articulate this vision in poetical form. As noted by Paul Portugés:

The spontaneous method of composition came to him as a unique, courageous approach to creativity, a complete turn-about from the rational and contrived idea of art as a perfectly finished product. He would rely on “the immediate flash material from the mind as it came from the complete unconscious.”...This approach reinforced Ginsberg's ideas about Blake and Plotinus and their insistence that true knowledge is intuitive.⁹

In this sense, for Ginsberg, the spontaneous method facilitates the expression of the *intuition*—“the immediate flash material from the mind as it came from the complete

⁷ Ginsberg, “The Art of Poetry” [1966], Interview with Tom Clark, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 17–53 (p. 26).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 56.

unconscious”:¹⁰ an intuition conceived, in Emersonian fashion, as an embodiment of the spiritual essence of the universal mind and apprehended as fundamentally authentic in the post-Romantic environment of Ginsberg's work. Eschewing rationality and defying syntactical expectations, this method is viewed as the most efficient for channelling a vision and delivering its content in written form since for Ginsberg, what goes onto the page is meant to be the reflection of his innermost insights of the very instant: “Mind is shapely, Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image.”¹¹ For all practical purposes, the spontaneous is highly strategic for the formulation of the visionary: it provides Ginsberg with an opportunity to carve his intuitions into the poem—intuitions through which the transcendent is carried into the writing itself to signify the sanctity of self-existence.

Concurrently, Ginsberg sought to optimize the reception of his mystical insights by the reader through a variety of devices located in the writing itself, in “Howl,” and in other poems. Here again, the modality of the spontaneous plays a major role: it allows him to disrupt an *ordinary* form of consciousness—that of the rational and the profane—in order to decondition the mind of his readers and prepare them for their encounter with the forthcoming vision. While Ginsberg’s use of the spontaneous method of composition relies, in great measure, on the faculties of the unconscious for catalysing a stream of freely associated words, sounds, and images into the prosody, it operates on a *supra*-level of consciousness rather than working below it. In Ginsberg's Romantic matrix, the intuitive voice of the poet is also that of the universal mind through the interplay of intuition—a voice that transcends cognition and elevates the self onto the plane of the transcendental.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ginsberg, “Notes Written on Finally Recording ‘Howl,’” in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg (Under Discussion)*, ed. by Lewis Hyde (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 80–83 (p. 81).

For this purpose, Ginsberg was assisted by a number of other poetical devices, such as iterations, which enabled him to disarray the continuity of his readers' thoughts as they developed during the act of reading. Widely used in the Scriptures and in many other sacred texts, repetitions convey a hypnotic mood that gradually overwhelms the reader and ends up engulfing his or her consciousness—ensuring a reader thus predisposed to enter a more mystical frame of mind. Ginsberg also relied heavily on the device of the ellipsis; allowing him to dismantle the narrative structure of his lines and involve the reader's own interpretative faculties through the attempt to bridge the gap and create sense out of it.

Once the channels of perception have been cleansed and the mind deconditioned, the vision may be communicated to the reader via the poem, which acts as a vessel for the transcendent. The conveyance of the visionary impulse through the writing is what situates Ginsberg, *sensu stricto*, in the poetical tradition of the Prophetic. In touch with the Blakean tradition, this operation is also inspired by the Transcendentalist precepts of Emerson, for whom “[the poet] is commanded in nature by the living power which he feels to be there present. No imitation or playing of these things would content him.”¹² In other words, the intuition must not only be incarnate; it must also be *enacted* through the poem in order to fulfil its transcendental potential. This proposition suggests that the mystical insights of the poet must be embodied and passed on to the reader in order to elicit the vision in his or her own mind.

For this purpose, Ginsberg has recourse to a poetics of embodiment that takes the form of breath patterns. As a completely instinctive act, breath also signifies in the Romantic underpinning of Ginsberg's poetry: it fosters an organic relation from nature to the self and from the self to nature through inspiration and expiration, respectively. This twinned motion

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet” [1844], in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Larzer Ziff, Penguin Classics, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 259–84 (p. 267).

is entrenched within the body and articulates both the immanent and the transcendental dimensions of being. This conception is largely assimilated by Ginsberg, who conceived breath as a poetical device enabling spiritual transactions between the personal and the universal. This simple device, apprehended in this specific context, is thought to possess the capacity to carry the spiritual essence of nature into the self through the poem. As Portugés reported:

After writing the “Moloch” section, Ginsberg realized the rhythmic units were based on his breathing (aligned with thought units); he believed that anyone reading Part II (i.e., the “Moloch” section) properly, would have to *breathe* exactly the way he was breathing while in the heightened state of awareness, the “hellish vale.” He had unconsciously transcribed his prophetic vision into rhythmic units that corresponded to his “breathing physiological spasm.”¹³

Ginsberg’s experimentation with a poetics derived from the movements of his own breath is guided by the desire to reclaim a form of physicality in the writing; a desire shared, before him, by the Objectivist poets, whose strategy of “projective verse” was tantalizing to the Beats. Louis Zukofsky (1904–1978), followed by Charles Olson (1910–1970), crafted a poetics that aimed at shortcutting the superfluties and circumvolutions of language, instead focusing attention on the immediacy and raw materiality encountered in daily life. What Ginsberg saw in the device of the projective verse was the capacity to corporealize his visionary impulse—which at this stage is but an essence; a poetical technique which allowed him to make his visions exist in the spatial and temporal dimension inhabited by his readers.

¹³ Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 78.

In practice, the transmission of the visionary impulse demands that Ginsberg's own intuitions be converted to breath patterns, which are then transcribed in rhythmic units—provided that breath and intuitions can be duly synchronised. Aimed at providing a physical envelope to the phenomenon of the vision, this strategy is also inherently performative, as the breathing patterns are to be re-enacted by the reader in his or her own time and space through the act of reading:

[T]he ... rhythmic ... units ... that I'd written down ... were basically ... breathing exercise forms ... which if anybody else repeated ... would catalyze in them the same *pranic* breathing ... physiological spasm ... that I was going through ... and so would presumably catalyze in them the same *affects* or emotions.¹⁴

This catalysing process is paramount: it relies on a transcendental performativity through which the poet is able to control—at least in theory—the reader's own breathing movements, which in turn are meant to induce the visionary event in the reader's own mind. Therefore the whole process becomes this: the spontaneous method of composition facilitates the formulation of his intuition in written form. Encapsulating what he recognizes as the visionary impulse, this intuition is then passed on to the reader through specific rhythmic patterns, with the intent to elicit a physiological reaction of a transcendental nature.

For Ginsberg: “Ideally each line of “Howl” is a single breath unit....My breath is long—that’s the Measure, one physical and mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath.”¹⁵ For this reason, the coupling of the prosodic rhythm with human

¹⁴ Ginsberg, “Improvised Poetics” [1980], Interview with Michael Aldrich, Edward Kissam, and Nancy Blecker, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 124–58 (p. 141).

¹⁵ Ginsberg, “Notes Written on Finally Recording ‘Howl,’” in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80–83 (p. 81).

breathing requires a line to be considerably long, in the tradition of Whitman. As pointed out by Richard Gray,

[Ginsberg] needed, he saw, to do what Williams and before him Whitman had done, “to adapt . . . poetry rhythms out of . . . actual talk rhythms”; and he now recognised Whitman’s long line as an appropriate precedent, a possible vehicle for what he called “my romantic—inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath.”¹⁶

Conjointly, this “romantic inspiration”—the intuition containing the visionary impulse—affects the very nature of the poetical language, which becomes pre-cognitive, since it is the breath of the poet that leads, technically, the creative process.¹⁷ Ultimately, the poem functions as a repository for the poet’s intuitions, which will shape it in return — a concept championed by Emerson in “The Poet” (1844):

For it is not metre, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form.¹⁸

Words, by contrast, become subservient, they punctuate rhythm rather than generate it.

Above all, such a strategy epitomizes a poetical form of intuitive self-expression that is capable of presenting—rather than simply representing—the transcendental moment in the most organic and symbiotic way possible. By aiming at relaying his intuitive insights,

¹⁶ Richard Gray, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* [1976], Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman, 1990), p. 301.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Emerson, “The Poet” [1844], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 259–84 (pp. 263–64).

Ginsberg's writing strategy typifies an impetus that is transcendental in essence, and through which the vision may be brought to the reader via the poem. Lodged at the core of Ginsberg's early poetical practice, this strategy seeks to reify the innermost and ownmost self upon the physical reality of the page by way of writing—an operation where the self is substituted for the vision, expounding the deepest but also the highest expression of the poet's consciousness.

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