

A Visit with Allen Ginsberg
Georgian Court College¹ in Lakewood, NJ
March 23, 1995

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 Edited by Paul Cappucci, Ph.D.²

Allen Ginsberg was invited by Dr. Eric Wurmser and Dr. Gail Holian, Professor of English, to conduct a master class for the Georgian Court students enrolled in their British Romanticism course.³ Since the class was open to the campus community, the session was held in the college's Little Theatre.⁴

Video Links to the Ginsberg Talk / Reading:

[“A Visit with Allen Ginsberg”: Georgian Court University \(Lakewood, NJ\) Part 1](#)

[“A Visit with Allen Ginsberg”: Georgian Court University \(Lakewood, NJ\) Part 2](#)

Introduction

Wurmser: This is one of the larger meetings of our Romantic Poetry class. I don't think we had quite this many people in our class. When we set up the Romantic's class, we wanted to include some modern poets and prose authors, which were Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. When we originally thought this up, we decided it might be . . . we might have the good fortune of having Mr. Ginsberg come here and indeed he did. Mr. Ginsberg is a New Jersey boy. He was born and raised in the Paterson area, as I think you all know, and his curricular vitae is a book in itself. I really won't go into that. He's extremely well-known. I think what is particularly important with Mr. Ginsberg is the fact that he shows the power of a poet. He was with a small group of creative men in the fifties and these men have really changed society. And if we look and see what has happened between the 60s and the 70s, I think you can easily track that. It is with great respect and great honor that I introduce to you Mr. Allen Ginsberg. [applause]

Ginsberg: [Ginsberg bows to the audience] Good evening, so how many in here are in the actual class, can you raise your hands? And the class is on Romantic poetry, part of it I understand. So, you dealt with some Blake, some Keats...

Wurmser: We haven't gotten to Keats yet... we have got to Wordsworth

¹ Georgian Court College became Georgian Court University in 2004.

² This project has been supported by a 2024 Georgian Court University Summer Research Grant.

³ Eric A. Wurmser, M.D. team taught classes with Dr. Holian. It was his idea to invite Allen Ginsberg to GCU's Lakewood campus. He supported and helped coordinate many aspects of the visit.

⁴ It should be noted that in transcribing this talk, we decided to leave out any “ah” and “ums,” as well as any repeated words as Allen Ginsberg formulated sentences. Also, at times, the audio quality is poor. We included footnotes to indicate when we encountered difficulty transcribing Ginsberg's comments or audience questions.

Ginsberg: Wordsworth, Shelley?

Wurmser: We did Coleridge ... we haven't gotten to Shelley yet ... Byron.

Ginsberg: Byron ... Does anybody have a Norton anthology or an anthology here that would have some British Romantic poets? I wonder if we could, if that is a part of the subject.

Audience Member: I have the text.

Ginsberg: Who has the text?

Audience Member: I have the text.

Ginsberg: Can I borrow it?

Audience Member: Knock yourself out.

Ginsberg: Whatever we got will do, so I thought maybe... [Handed the book]
What have we got here? English Romantic writers [unintelligible]. So, what I thought as a preface to what I'm doing, would be, maybe, to read aloud Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and then move on to . . . just got to find it here. And the rest of you who are sitting in, are you part of the school? Or the neighbors?

How many here know the "Ode to the West Wind?" Raise your hands. When I went to school, which was a quite a long while ago, in high school in the thirties, that was taken for granted that everybody would have some Shakespeare, some *Macbeth*, or some Blake and some Shelley, and a few of the Romantic poets. A little bit of, the "Ode to the West Wind" or Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," Wordsworth's sonnet on Westminster Bridge and those are all a part of high school studies. A lot of that has been lost and... Let me focus on this and find what I am looking for. [Looks for the page and there is a joke⁵] Yeah, I hear you.

So, the purpose of my reading this is to draw some parallels between my own writing and writing by Gregory Corso or Kerouac or other of the Beat writers and the old tradition of Shelley.

But the one problem is that there are people that are without seats up there and there. Any of you younger people, there's plenty of room up front here if you want to come up here and sit down and make room for some older people to come into the house. We have this space so let's make use of it. Plenty of room up here, you can sit down on the stage, or on the ground. Make yourself comfortable. There may be a few extra chairs around. Are there any extra seats in the audience there? Three or four seats over there that are not being taken if you want to sit down. Go around there—one, two, three, four, sixth row.

⁵ Audience member shouts out the page number twice—1026.

So, what I would like to do is read aloud a poem called the “Ode to the West Wind” by Shelley. The subject of the poem is wind or breath or spirit, Latin spiritus, breathing, so spirit is really breath, or he is using the wind, the west wind as the breath of earth so to speak. And the subject of this poem, as in a number of poems, is the breath itself. Where there’s breath, there’s life. Where there’s breath, there’s spirit. So, the breath as the breath of life and Shelley’s idea of launching his own mind and his thoughts out on his breath in this poem is really interesting because if you read this poem aloud, following the punctuation to indicate where you should *breathe*, you are really taking into your body Shelley’s breathing and replicating his physiological nervous system in your own body and you can get high on it or hyperventilate. It’s not high, but it’s also a great piece of music or a great piece of rhythm or a great piece of timing and a great set of breaths, great sounds. Then some would say this one poem is an icon that Jack Kerouac knew from grammar school and high school, that William Burroughs knew, that Gregory Corso the poet knew, that I knew very well because my father taught it in high school in Paterson, New Jersey. So, I knew it when I was a kid around the house, and it sort of entered into my own physiology as breathing, as rhythm, and Kerouac’s. So, it’s a touchstone or icon for us, for a tradition of ecstatic poetry or exhilaration of poetry or exuberance in poetry and deep breath in poetry. He wrote it, I guess a year or so before he died, one or two years before he died, actually prophesizes his death by drowning. Well, no he gets to that in “Adonais” ...For those who are interested, his other elegy for Keats called “Adonais” at the end, as that prophecy of his own drowning by being blown into the sea, winds blowing his sailboat into the ocean.

[Ginsberg reads Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” 9:32-14:00]

[Audience Applause]

Ginsberg: What you see is a kind of ecstatic exuberant energy measured on the breath. So, it's sort of like the joining of Heaven and Earth. In the sense of the Earth, or the body, the breath, physical breath comes from the body and it's a physical thing—the thoughts come more from the mind, the heavenly, the impalpable, the non-material, and they go out as proclamation on the vehicle of the breath. So, there is the old Daoist Chinese or Oriental notion of the emperor joins Heaven and Earth. Or, the poet or speech joins mind and body, where speech synchronizes mind and body. Or, you might say speech is a proclamation from the throne or can be if it's the right Chutzpah, the right courage, the right proclamation, the right sense of imperial straight-back, good head and shoulders, proclaiming the mind outside into the phenomenal world. So poetry as proclamation as one aspect of poetry. Here like trumpets in a sense, trumpet call of enunciation really done on the breath itself. This is interesting, done just by breath. So, the subject matter of this poem is interesting because it is the breath itself the wind, the West Wind. Wanting to identify his own breath with the breath of earth or the wind, the West Wind itself.

[Shifts to Questioning the Audience]

Ginsberg: What is the West Wind anyway? Anybody know? What particular thing? What was that verse. What's the difference between West and East Wind? Is there any symbolic difference in the Western tradition? There is probably some symbolic difference.⁶

Wurmser: West Wind is clearing wind and bringing cold, cool air and refreshing.

Ginsberg: Okay that'll be good, renovation, yeah, renewal, or resurrection, the resurrection of spirit, resurrection of soul. So that's a kind of interesting shot.

Gregory Corso, as a poet, was very much involved with the inspiration of Shelley. I think that's another interesting word *inspiration*. You can inspire and you expire, breathing, coming from Spiritus again, from breathing. So poetic inspiration is a state of unobstructed breath, like when the body is like a hollow reed so to speak. If anybody of you are interested or seen photographs of the very famous Indian Saint Ramakrishna of 19th century Indian holy man. There's a very famous photograph of him in supposedly, in a state of ecstasy, where he's . . .⁷ You can tell that his body is full of air. It's like a hollow tube of air and it's unobstructed breath. So, in a state of inspiration you could say, poetic inspiration means more or less that physiological state of unobstructed breath, where the breath is completely clear and the thoughts flow spontaneously and almost clairvoyantly. It's not a transcendental excitement so much as it is a physical state of total relaxation and total clear unobstructed breath, as distinct from a more neurotic, you know, holding yourself in. It's more opening out to the phenomenal world rather than sheltering and protecting yourself. So, it means a certain amount of vulnerability but at the same time the kingly or imperial attitude of proclamation, like a king giving a proclamation to the to his subject or to the phenomenal world or the poet or bard trumpeting his thought out into the outer, outside of his subjective realm or revealing his subjective realm to the space which encompasses everybody's consciousness.

So just I thought that would be an interesting thing to begin with since you're into the Romantic, the study is Romantic. Usually, romantic is taking to mean dreamy or neurotically fantastical rather than totally present, totally in your own body, totally at one with your own skin and body and breathing, and at its best romantic can be total presence, total prescience, presence and awareness of the space that you're in and the vastness of the space. So probably the key is that this sense of being awake, completely awake, rather than be leaping off and as some, as one awake aware of the space around, including the fact that there is plenty of space down here to sit [audience laughter]. So, observant of what's going on in the phenomenal world around you rather than daydreaming and escaping it, and not only aware of the present space but of the surrounding space or the panoramic awareness, that we're in a room somewhat artificially lit, but above us is a sky, Lakewood area in New Jersey and we're on a planet in the solar system at the edge of a

⁶ Due to the sound quality, it is difficult to transcribe Ginsberg's exact phrasing here.

⁷ Ginsberg simulates the Ramakrishna's pose to the audience.

spiral nebula in an infinitely vast space.⁸ And that consciousness of vastation or panoramic awareness is probably characteristic of the romantic ecstasy that you'll find in some of Shelley and some of Wordsworth like his sonnet on the Westminster Bridge, which might, since it is such a good example of that sense of panoramic awareness this might pick up on that. Could you look that up and let me know where Wordsworth's sonnet on Westminster, lines "Composed on Westminster Bridge" is the title. Check that out maybe make use of that as a specimen. You've done, have you done that in the Wordsworth studies? But it would be interesting to look at from this angle of presence and awareness. Somebody got it there? Somebody got a copy of the book that...pardon me.⁹

So "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3rd, 1802." So, it's located in time. My contention in a way is that what you get a glimpse from in this poem is a glimpse of vast space. "Earth has not," Westminster Bridge is in the middle of London, you know, from Westminster to...

[Ginsberg reads Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3rd, 1802" 22:40-23:25]

So, what you get is the panorama of the rooftops, ships, towers, domes, theaters, temples lie open onto the fields into the sky and all of a sudden, the gaze lifts and you have the entire ... the lower part of the visual panorama. You have the ship, tower, domes, temples, and all of a sudden in the, imagine the third . . . in your mind's eye, you get the blind open onto the sky so you get this vast thing which is much vaster than London and so you get this little glimpse of panoramic awareness a little bit like a Chinese scroll landscape in a sense. So, if you look at a lot of the specimens of records of some romantic or ecstatic or aesthetic or mystical experience as expressed in the Romantics, you might find some reference to some sense of oceanic vastness or panoramic awareness or sudden wakening in the depths of space and the depths of the cosmos and realizing the vast vastness. And so as a poetic practice for those of you who are interested in writing poetry or improving your mind, one very interesting thing to do is several times a day empty your mind into the sky. Literally stop where you are, stop your mechanical thinking of you know, I got a parking ticket or I got to get class and just like look into the sky with no particular purpose except, oh well let us say dissolving your thought in empty space, in the blue empty space or cloudy empty space. It's as good as getting high on acid. I think that's all you do when you get high on acid is really your mind is dissolving into space, but you can do it free without the need of cops on your shoulder, the moral majority saying you're not supposed to have mystical visions or something.

⁸ It should be noted that Lakewood, NJ, the site of Georgian Court University, is memorably referenced in "Kaddish" as the town where Ginsberg travelled with his mother in search of a rest home. During the remainder of Ginsberg's talk, he never again mentions the town's name; however, he does later mention his mother's influence on his desire to be a labor lawyer.

⁹ Audience member shares the page number 280

So, if you get to Kerouac in his writing, from his first book *The Town and City* on, you'll see that kind of panoramic awareness glimpse through over and over again. You'll be in the middle of a, maybe in the middle of a description of a football field and suddenly as if the camera will pan back and from the detail, you'll suddenly see the entire football field and you'll see the high school around it and the city streets around it and then the trees and the rest of the cityscape and then the sky. In its verbal description of the scene beginning with a detail within the scene or if you look at paintings by Bruegel or some of the Rembrandt landscapes, you also get that sense of panoramic awareness or vastness of everything going on human, underneath. There is even more of that sky. So, I'm just thinking this as I came in, as being maybe the characteristic of Romantic poetry. Some sense of you know, cosmic, cosmos, but in a very literal way, a visual glimpse of cosmos, a visual glimpse of immensity. We get that in Hart Crane, which I know is one of your favorite poets¹⁰, particularly in his poem "The Bridge." You get it a lot in Burroughs. And then in my own poetry I try to reproduce it; you can get it in a one line even. The Japanese haikus that can give you that sense. A very famous one "Oh ant / climb up Mount Fuji / but slowly slowly!"¹¹ So, you have the vast slope of Fuji and a little tiny ant. You suddenly get some sense of space. Or, "a wild sea / and stretching out toward the Isle of Sado / the Milky Way."¹² So you got, you know, the Great Wave the Japanese painting with a great wave, with a boat in a wild sea, then you know the Isle of Sado is ahead, but then stretching out from the Isle of Sado, the Milky Way. Suddenly the glimpse lifts, and you got the whole Milky Way, the entire heavens above your head. So, in one line, as in a haiku, you can get that space glimpse. Of my own attempt to imitate that I had some haikus in a recent book, but I called them "American Sentences." The haiku got to be a corny you know: "sitting in front of a microphone smelling the last Hitler saliva ... I think" yeah . . . no, no ...¹³ [Looks for his Haiku]

"In the half-light of dawn," this is an invitation of the wild sea stretching out to the Isle of Sado of the Milky Way. "In the half-light of dawn a few birds warble under the Pleiades."¹⁴ So, you have the horizon, birds in the trees, then suddenly under the Pleiades. Or, in another sense the trans shifting of time: "Caught shoplifting ran out of the department store at sunrise and woke up."¹⁵ Here the space is not the space of sky, but the spaces between dream and waking, a sudden shift, so that sudden expansion from the claustrophobia of caught shoplifting. Then, there's a transition they ran out of the department store. Still, you have the pursued criminal in a claustrophobic dream. "At sunrise"—well that opens it a little and "woke up"—then, it opens it completely, opens the mind space completely. So, maybe I've gotten myself into a corner here. I don't have any writing of my own really that fits all that notion that I was thinking more of Kerouac. So, okay I talked a bit. We've been studying, one other, one, two, since we've now got into

¹⁰ Turns to Dr. Wurmser when referencing Crane.

¹¹ This is a translated Kobayashi Issa haiku. Some translations use snail rather than ant.

¹² This translated haiku comes from Matsuo Bashō.

¹³ This seems to be a spontaneous line.

¹⁴ Ginsberg's "221 Syllables at Rocky Mountain Dharma Center" (CP 883)

¹⁵ Repeats this line twice.

mind space rather than physical space, let's dig a little bit of Gregory Corso have you studied any of him?

Ginsberg: Gregory Corso, is he on your curriculum?

Student: Yeah.

Ginsberg: “Riprap,” that would be Gary Snyder. Give me a moment [Searching book] ...¹⁶ Okay. Find a specimen of Gregory Corso which opens up that state of mind and space. Okay. “Birthplace Revisited,” a very early poem from the 50s. Among the Beat writers Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, myself, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen would be the core group, I would say. Corso, I think, is among the greatest of the poets. This is a very early lyric but the same space I was talking about between waking . . . sleep and waking, the claustrophobia of sleep and waking.

[Allen Ginsberg reads Gregory Corso’s “Birthplace Revisited” 32:38-33:06]

So, this is about the same situation now. He's in a claustrophobic situation, a nightmare. Again “Dirty Ears / aims a night at me knife at me... / I pump him full of lost watches.”¹⁷ Time trans shifting—“lost watches.” Well, this from childhood, kids have watches, they lose them, they talk about watches, they steal watches. But “I pump him full of lost watches” means I suddenly awake from the daydream in a way. In another little space shot I suppose you could imply it¹⁸. I don't think it's exactly the same:

[Allen Ginsberg reads Gregory Corso’s “Italian Extravaganza” 33:52-34:14]

So that would be just the contrast between the little, tiny coffin and the Italian extravaganza, the wedding . . . I mean the funeral.¹⁹ So, for Gary Snyder, that sense of space, in and out of space is totally present as a Zen student and Buddhist. The sense of open space, emptiness, vastness and emptiness and silence, is part of the basic aesthetics and even state of consciousness of meditation practice in Buddhism or Zen or Tibetan style meditation. The awareness of the discontinuity of thoughts or as Shakespeare says in *The Tempest*, when Prospero has resolved all of his problems and is ready to go home to retire and die on his magic island, says to Genoa then, “where every third thought shall be my grave.”²⁰ So, thought number one, thought number two, thought number three, thought number four. So, in that sense even Shakespeare noticed that thought is

¹⁶ It's unclear what Ginsberg says here. According to our best effort to transcribe, it seems something like “find the section on Gregory Corso which opens up that same mind and space.”

¹⁷ Ginsberg simulates a finger gun as he reads the ellipses and the final line. The audience laughs.

¹⁸ The phrasing is a bit mumbled here. It seems Ginsberg says “imply” but it could be “apply.”

¹⁹ Audience laughter follows this correction.

²⁰ The line comes from Prospero's final speech in the play and reads “And thence retire me to my Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave.” It is unclear the character that Ginsberg names here. It sounds like he says Genova, which is most likely a reference to Alonso, the King of Naples.

sequential and perhaps even discontinuous. Cause one minute you think about hot dogs, and the next minute you think about your coffin. There's a gap in between, and nobody knows where the next thought will come from. So, it's all totally surprise mind. So that in Buddhist terms they speak of thought as unborn, like the universe unborn. In the sense you can't trace it back to its womb. You can't trace a thought back to its root. It appears like a flower in the air and dissolves. Rises, dissolve, rises, flowers and dissolves, and is replaced, maybe in a 60th of a second later with another thought and like the movies, one frame after another. It appears continuous, but when you sit and meditate, you realize it's discontinuous that there is a gap in between thoughts. So that phrase by Shakespeare, "every third thought shall be my grave" is quite interesting. Kerouac pointed that out to me, that particular Shakespeare number.

So, an example of discontinuity of thought, gap and space between thoughts, can be found in most poetry but say in our tradition in America, the pre-figuring the deep interest in Zen and Buddhism and space and mind space and empty space, you can find in William Carlos Williams, some examples of attention to the space in your mind and realization of the nature of mind as open space interrupted by thoughts, so to speak. I'd like to read two short poems by Williams which are known to most of the Beat poets and interesting to them. One is called "Good Night." It's 1917:

[Allen Ginsberg Reads William Carlos Williams's "Good Night" 37:52-38:54]

Okay, so what happens here? The subject is the nature . . . is the changes in his mind, the movement of his mind. It isn't necessarily anything in the outer world. He's observing how his mind moves from one thought to another with gaps in between. Beginning with coming downstairs, a drink of water, late at night, turning on the kitchen spigot, watching the water splash, brilliant gas light, crisp green parsley, glass on the groove drain board. Everything lucid—very present, very clear. Then he spaces out waiting for the water to freshen. Maybe keyed off by the rubber sandals under the wall table: "Waiting, with a glass in his hand - / three girls in crimson satin / pass close before me on / the murmurous background of / the crowded opera." Then he comes back to himself and says, "memory playing the clown," what am I doing here thinking about this. Then he spaces out again: "three vague, meaningless girls ... / the rustling sounds of / cloth rubbing on cloth and / little slippers on the carpet / the high-school French / spoken in a loud voice! / Parsley in a glass / still and shining / brings me back." So, the movement of the mind, that's interesting there, that's his subject matter.

It's a little bit appropriate around 1917 is it that Einstein proclaims relativity? Saying that a measuring instrument determines the appearance of the phenomenal world. So that here is Williams around the same time examining the measuring instrument, the mind itself. And much poetry and art from that time on, goes back to look at the mind, or the consciousness itself, or the materials of consciousness. The relativism of the phenomenal world. That it's not fixed and stable but does depend on the observer. That ultimately the appearance of the universe is determined by the observer. There is no such thing as

objectivity because we are all subject or observers. There is no absolute objectivity as Einstein points out. Because who is the one that's proclaiming or who's observing? Well, it's us, a person. So that actually is consonant with the great proclamation by Whitman, "I celebrate myself and sing myself and what I shall assume you shall assume." So, Whitman's word for that was Person with a capital P. That that was the center. Person is the center of our consideration as human beings not some fake, supposed, objective, externalized standard because there is no external since we are the observers of the external. The only thing we know is what we see of the of the external. So, all we know is our minds. We don't know the real external and perhaps the real external doesn't even exist outside of our minds.

So that brings us back to the notion of the romantic—i.e. the subject or subjective or person as being the ultimate arbiter or the ultimate reality, rather than a supposedly objective reality imposed on us by the machine, or by inventors of machines, who want to say that the external machine world, with its arithmetical regulation, is reality and we are not reality. So that finally the individual becomes intimidated and thinks that he is not real, but the external world is real. That he is not real, but the nation is real, but any good libertarian knows that the nation is a figment of the imagination, and the personal perception is the only that that exists actually for us. We cannot know more than what we know, and the only thing we know is what we smell, see, hear, taste, touch, and think and guess and measure. But nonetheless it's all us measuring, and it all comes back to the observer as Einstein said—the appearance of the phenomenal world is determined by the nature of the observer. So that brings us back to the romance of being alive in the world with the universe, which is not dead, and that the external universe is not dead except as we interpret it as dead. So, I think that probably was a key insight that the Beat writers had because they were interested in what is the texture of consciousness, what's the nature of consciousness. That was the reason for experimentation in with drugs, the reason for the movement toward Eastern thought and meditative practice, an actual practice of meditation, reason for interest in art and poetry as communication between real people about their subjective realizations and perceptions. The following out of the Whitman's suggestion that poets of the future in America should specialize in candor²¹. The end of schizophrenia between official thinking of what they thought themselves, what people thought and what was the thought that you're supposed to have or the thought that you're allowed to have, the official thought, or the party line as they used to call it in Russia, where the same schizophrenia was even more pronounced. So how to avoid the almost inevitably imposed schizophrenia or good personality laid on us by hyper technology, which assumes that nothing is news unless it's on the radio. That our feelings are not important, but what is proclaimed as official is important. So that how to reclaim our own lives from the usurpation of State, media, and stereotype. How to actually awaken from the great dream of some laid on us, what Blake says 6,000 years ago, "6,000 years of sleep,"²² with the

²¹ Ginsberg then spells out the word candor.

²² A reference to Blake that Ginsberg includes in his poem "Yiddishe Kopf" (CP 1013). This poem references Blake's "To Nobodaddy."

imposition of a hierarchical monotheistic thought system, referring the origin of all things not to ourselves but to an external Creator who we could not know and was there to reward or punish us. So, Blake said that the Western notion of the Divine was in fact Satan, was satanic, because it imposed on us highway robbery of our own subject, of our own consciousness. That's so that's the old hermetic notion that that runs through the agnostics and the Hermetic philosophers up through Blake and finally up through Shelley and probably up through Burroughs, certainly, and somewhat to Kerouac and to my own work, which is probably the reason for our interest in Buddhist or Eastern thought. Because in Eastern thought there is no central personality of the Divine, like there is in fundamentalist Islam. Plus, a priestly class²³ to tell you what God said or a fundamentalist interpretation of Christian or fundamentalist interpretation of Jewish or fundamentalist interpretation of Hindu, as we've been seeing lately in the communal riots in India. The Buddhist and Confucian thing does not assume a central reference point but assumes like an open space and the only reference point is completely open space, accommodating space, endless space, no beginnings, no ends. So, I guess that's the basis, philosophically, of what most of the poets of the Beat generation were into and it's not so far away from the interest in studies of the early Romantics actually, Coleridge, Blake, and in his earlier years probably Wordsworth and Shelley certainly. Now, if you have got any questions. I've been blabbing along around for 60 minutes, for particularly no good reason. Yes?

Question and Answer Period:

1st Questioner: Kerouac has a poem that illustrates what you talked about earlier.

Ginsberg: Yeah.

1st Questioner: Going from the particular to the universal.

Ginsberg: Yeah.

1st Questioner: His haiku, "Useless! Useless! / the heavy rain driving / into the sea."²⁴

Ginsberg: Yeah, that's one of his great ones. He has some poems that give you that sense of space and I have some here. Let me read a couple. *Mexico City Blues* by Kerouac is one of the, I think one of the great seminal works of poetry of this half century. It had a big influence on me. I'm just imitating Kerouac to some extent. It was the book that turned on Bob Dylan to poetry and through Dylan, turned on millions of people around the world to become singer, poet, minstrel bards. But Dylan told me that someone had given him Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* in 1959 and handed it to him—that's his word—in St. Paul and it blew his mind. That was his phrase: "it blew my mind." I said why? What was it about it?

²³ This phrasing is bit unclear whether it's "case" or "class."

²⁴ The poem is entitled "Useless! Useless!" from Kerouac's *The Book of Haiku*

He said it was the first book of poetry that spoke to me in my own language, in American language. So:

[Ginsberg Reads Jack Kerouac's "3rd Chorus" from *Mexico City Blues* 49:16-49:52]

It's just a sudden, the "unending heaven" of the national debt has a vast core. 10th chorus. That was the 3rd chorus.

[Ginsberg reads Jack Kerouac's "10th Chorus" from *Mexico City Blues* 50:05-50:38]

So, you suddenly go from this panorama of the world to spots of foam on the ocean. Regarding the sense of discontinuity of mind:

[Ginsberg reads Jack Kerouac's "17th Chorus" from *Mexico City Blues* 50:51-51:20]

Really good for pointing instructions as the recollections as kids of you know, cradle . . . crib recollections of mental daydreaming.

This is a little bit more directly into the sense of space-glimpse—"24th Chorus":

[Ginsberg reads Jack Kerouac's "24th Chorus" from *Mexico City Blues* 51:41-52:21]

So, you then get a really big, what sudden panoramic awareness of the vast immensities of the sea at midnight in the dark with a bubble pop of foam snit at the center of it. Yeah?

2nd Questioner: I've always thought that the Beats had a serious way of not taking themselves too seriously, a sense of humor that I—we—witness here. I always wondered if that could be explained. Was it a deliberate thing? The lightness sometimes next to the serious.

Ginsberg: Well, what is the nature of mind, itself? Mind is serious. Mind is light. Mind is funny. Mind is quixotic. The American Indians had a symbol for it—coyote. You know, fucks your mother, eats your nose off, jumps off the rock, pisses on a rock, and creates the universe. Is that funny or serious? I don't know. We have it in the roadrunner. You know—the cartoons—we have the coyote image. But around the world certain polar bear or raven or any number of totem figures who are the trickster heroes, like Loki, Mercury, who represent the actual nature of the mind which is contradictory. Which goes contradictory—quixotic both at once, which goes back to another romantic notion the phrase "negative capability." Has anybody heard that? Negative capability? Raise your hand if you know what that is? That's from a letter by John Keats to his brother. He was sitting—directly to your question—he was sitting at a big dull academic supper and a couple professors, or somebody was talking about literature, and he was bored. He began to think what is it that makes Shakespeare so great. Then he wrote a letter to his brother saying, "I was sitting, and I was in this situation at supper, and I thought what makes Shakespeare so different

and great than others is the quality of negative capability. That is the ability to hold in the mind completely opposite and contradictory opinions, overt views, or thoughts, without an irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Now the key there is everybody wants to be reasonable. Everybody wants to be factual, but without an irritable reaching after fact and reason, without this aggressive insistency that it's got to be black or white, a or not a, liberal or neocon, whatever, that there's a tolerance for both to exist at once in the mind. And Whitman has the same attitude when he says in *Leaves of Grass*, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well I contradict myself, / I am large I contain multitudes.”²⁵ So, it is the nature of the mind to be democratically large, containing multitudes of thoughts, many of them contradictory. So, if you admit your own mind to your poetry or to your writing or to yourself. If you allow it, if you take a friendly attitude toward your mind, rather than a condemnatory attitude. Take a friendly attitude toward your mind, then you will find a contradiction to be part of the play of mind, so that you're really not bugged by the contradiction. Or as when T.S. Eliot said of the writer Henry James, “Henry James had a mind so refined that no idea could violate it.”²⁶ Totally different attitude. That's a Buddhist attitude, also I'll come to that in a moment. The Buddhist view is that the universe is completely real. You know,²⁷ it's here, real. You'll hurt your head if you hit it too hard. Simultaneously and without contradiction is completely illusion and maya, both at once. Now how did they get to that. Well, you know, come back in a 100 years and ask me if this room is real. It'll be like you know a matter is water, it flows, it changes. Back to Heraclitus, everything is flowing, everything is in flux. So, what is real for one moment, it dissolves, and it's gone like a dream. So, because of the nature of the very basic thing of change and transitoriness ... that Heraclitus pointed out, which is the second characteristic of existence in Buddhism. You know, when it describes existence as one, characteristic is change, transitoriness. Because of this nature of transitoriness, what is real is also dissolvable and therefore by hindsight, not there anymore; therefore, it might be compared to illusion or maya, like a dream, which seems real while you're in it and is real when you're in it, but when you wake up it's gone. It turns out to have no inherent permanent essence, so existence has no inherent permanent reference point. On the other hand, it seems real while it's here, but on the other hand it's also simultaneously empty. So, the Buddhist view is very similar to the negative capability, the Whitmanic contradiction, that things are both real and or the formal statement of that is in the Prajnaparamita Sutra, the highest perfect wisdom sutra, basic Buddhist text chanted in Zen and Tibetan Shrine rooms every morning.

[Ginsberg Recites the “Heart Sutra” 58:07-59:26]

So that's the central part of the “Heart Sutra,” the highest part ... so those are, that was a big influence on Beat writers, particularly Snyder and Kerouac, the notion of form or

²⁵ The line appears in Section 51 of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”

²⁶ The line is a reference to Eliot’s essay entitled “In Memory of Henry James” (*The Egoist*, January 1918). However, Eliot’s original phrasing is “He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it” (2).

²⁷ Ginsberg pounds on the table.

solidity, reality, and emptiness in solidity transitoriness, being simultaneous, parts of the same coin, different sides of the same coin, not contradictory but simultaneously existing. Negative capability—the ability to hold contradictory ideas in the mind without an irritability reaching after fact and reasoning. That make sense?

3rd Questioner: How can we have renunciation and a great love of beauty? And does beauty have an ultimate value in renunciation?

Ginsberg: Well, renunciation can mean not clinging to thoughts. Not having an irritability insistence on maintaining one thought or another. Letting your thoughts go, taking a friendly attitude toward your mind, observing your thoughts and letting them go. As for the instructions on that would come from Blake, which are the same as the Zen instructions: “He who binds to himself a joy / Does the winged life destroy / He who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in eternity's Sunrise.”²⁸ So in other words, another way of putting it, is a favorite Blake poem that Bob Dylan asked me about a year ago or so: “I asked a thief to steal me a peach: / He turned up his eyes / I ask'd a lithe lady to lie her down: / Holy and meek she cries / As soon as I had gone / Along came a thief / And 'twixt earnest and joke / Had a peach from the tree / And without one word spoke / still as a maid / enjoy'd the lady”²⁹ So its “twixt earnest and joke.” So, Buddhism says that beauty, your attitude, your beauty is renunciation “twixt earnest and joke.” Don't try and cling to it. On the other hand, if you don't cling to it, it passes like all things that offend you, but then more comes along. As you cling to it, turns ugly and clogs your mind: “I want that girl. That's the girl I wanted all along. I won't have anybody but her. I'm going to kill her if she doesn't love me. I'll kill myself.”³⁰ Instead of saying well, next time.

So, the Buddhist attitude is non-clinging and renunciation but on the other hand it doesn't mean non-enjoyment and non-appreciation. And so, the Buddhist view is that art is a major mode of meditation. That artwork and appreciation of art is a major way of mind training. It's different from maybe some of the puritanical Western views of Buddhism or Marxism for that matter. I can't be a great writer until I'm a member of the proletariat. I can't be a great writer unless I've been blessed by a vision of Christ. I can't be a great Buddhist writer unless I've already attained Nirvana. There is no Nirvana, according to the Sutra I was just describing, “no attainment because no non-attainment,” so you're free. You had your hand up?

4th Questioner: Yes, you had just ... William Carlos Williams and communicated his style just wondering when you would get there?³¹

Ginsberg: To Williams?

²⁸ Recites from memory William Blake's poem entitled “Eternity.”

²⁹ Recites from memory William Blake's poem entitled “I Asked a Thief.” The audience laughs with his emphasis on the final line.

³⁰ Audience laughs in response to this fictional exclamation.

³¹ This question is difficult to hear. It is focused on the poetry of William Carlos Williams.

4th Questioner: Yes, and whether you would get there, and how you felt about him and his poetry. And I was thinking particularly in terms of the haiku, a little red wheelbarrow and the plums in the refrigerator. Tell me a little bit more on William Carlos Williams.

Ginsberg: Well, everybody has read some William Caros Williams here? How many have? So great, welcome to New Jersey! Homeboy.³² I would say most of modern poetry, not Beat poetry necessarily, but most of modern poetry whether Black Mountain—Robert Creeley, Charles Olson—or San Francisco—Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, or Robert Duncan, or myself, or Corso—or The New York School—Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, James Schuyler—all refer back to William Carlos Williams as a mentor, for us all. So, the question is why? Because Williams had the idea of clamping his mind down on objects. “No ideas but in things”—giving for instances, so to speak instead of generalization to these specific, for instances, and he brought everybody down to ground in this. Set us—set an example of it in many ways. One in perception and observation, like “So much depends / upon // the red wheel / barrow // glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens.” So much of what? So much of his own clarity of perception depends or writing, depends on him able to being able to appreciate that and see it as a new-shining, new-found, new-born object. As if you were high on acid or something. You know, a moment, a mystical experience, in an ordinary moment. As if, ordinary mind concluded highest eternal perceptions. Ordinary mind and eternal perceptions are the same, could be the same, in the same mind; whereas his friend believes it, Zukofsky says, “Nothing is better for being eternal, nor so white as the white that dies of a day.”³³ It's like pretty Jewish down there: “nothing is better for being eternal, nothing is better for being eternal, it would do you some good if it's eternal.”³⁴ “Nothing is better for being eternal, nor so white as the white that dies of a day.” So, it's again, the similar Buddhist thing, the appreciation of transitoriness, the appreciation of what's right in front of you now, this is a Zen matter too. So, Williams has that, but it's also beyond that in language. He appreciated the current language of Rutherford, New Jersey, New Jersey-esque, and he wrote in a New Jersey-esque speech. I remember the first time I visited him, written on his doctor's prescription pad, “I'll kick yuh eye.”³⁵ There's some guy around Rutherford saying that. Then how can I write that down in iambic pentameter? You can't. You just got to use those intense fragments of spoken idioms, intact as specimens in the poem. You build your poem out of the way you talk really here in New Jersey, and the actual speech of the streets, or the household, or your mother, or your wife, or children. You write the way you talk with a living

³² Audience laughs in response to Ginsberg's comment on Williams as a NJ “Homeboy.”

³³ Ginsberg is quoting from Louis Zukofsky's “A.”

³⁴ The audience again laughs at Ginsberg's impersonation.

³⁵ He spells it out.as “yuh” for your.

tongue and that's also what the Romantics did. Because Wordsworth in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" and, along with Coleridge, was pointing out that, you had to update the diction or the use of words and the way you talk, so it just didn't sound like a rehash of older poetry but with the intelligent speech of intelligent people right now in the present. It didn't necessarily just remind you of, recycle old buzzwords from poetry. They had a breakout from what? Pope, more you know, basically they had a break from rhyming couplet, what the straight jacket was, I guess, around that time. Is that right?

Wurmser: Yeah ...³⁶

Ginsberg: Yeah, and there were some great innovators that broke. Like Blake particularly with the long line, denounced rhyme in the long line and denounced the heavy measure of the rhyming couplet and wrote his books in long, long verse lines. We had to do that in our century too and Williams really accomplished that, like as a pediatrician, here he, similar to midwife, the birth of a new language and a new poetic. So, everybody refers back to him and that's his role. Along with several other poets who are not so well known, who are very great, like Charles Reznikoff and Carl Rakosi, were also members of that same school activist or objectivist, and their allies were found before them.

5th Questioner: I haven't heard you mention Cassady's name at all tonight. You were mentioning the core writers, I know *The First Third* he wrote to my knowledge. I don't think he published that, would you consider him being a part of the core writers....?³⁷

Ginsberg: Sure, in a lot of ways. But there is another book, there are two other books of his by the way beside *The First Third*. There is a book put out by Creative Arts Press, his letters to me and my letters to him, our correspondence called *As Ever* and that's been out about 15 years. And there's a new book, it just came out two years ago, letters to his wife from jail called *Grace Beats Karma*, Grace transcends Karma, Grace beats Karma, and they're very funny letters, very well written. Now his contribution is very interesting. It's like that every third thought shall be my grave, the consciousness of the chain of thoughts or the sequence of thought forms arriving at the present moment when you're writing. Cassady was very good at re-collecting the sequence of thought forms in a conversation that would lead up to the present moment when everybody woke up and realized what they were talking about. So, he would say, hearkening back seven thoughts back, then he could actually retrace the remembered and retraced the chain of thoughts that led to a certain moment. He was particularly good on it, but everybody else was confused on marijuana

³⁶ It's unclear what is said here ... Wordsworth might be the poet mentioned.

³⁷ Again, the sound quality for this question is not clear.

and couldn't remember anything. And with short-term memory, he had a very long-term memory on that and that apparently. So, his ingenuity was consciousness of his mind and the texture of his mind and from letters to Kerouac—that's what influenced Kerouac so much. To turn Kerouac to appreciation of his own mental flow, the flow of thought form and from that Kerouac got the idea of spontaneous poetry or prose, imitating that mental flow. I had one other Kerouac example of mental flow that also included that sense of panoramic awareness. Well, see what this sounds like. "110th Chorus" is a sheer example of improvisatory mental flow and at the same time mind opening out into some kind of vast landscape and then closing back again:

[Ginsberg reads Jack Kerouac's "110th Chorus" from *Mexico City Blues* 8:27-9:27]

So that's mind flow and there also that, so the camera pans out to the, what the, "Transcendental Inner Mind / where glorious radiant Howdahs / are be carried by elephants / with groves of flowing / milk past paradises of waterfalls" like this gorgeous Shakespearean landscape that suddenly comes up and then ends. So, I think he got that sense of mind flow from Cassady, and I think that was Cassady's peak contribution basically. I want to finish with one of the last, the last of the Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*, the opening: "The sound in your mind / is the first sound / that you could sing // If you were singing / at a cash register / with nothing on yr mind –" That unintentional, re-collection of what actually goes on in your own mind. Not unintentional without the intention of cashing in on it, like a poet, but just remembering your own mind; that was Cassady's contribution, remembering your own mind. And in Buddhism they call it mindfulness and they cultivate it by meditation practice, by trying to focus on the breath, then the mind keeps coming up interrupting, and you get a profile of that, and you become aware of it you take a friendly attitude toward your mind, take a friendly attitude toward your thoughts. You don't push them away, nor do you invite them in for tea. You just let them go by and they take care of themselves, they're not human, they're thoughts that pass through you. So, it's the observer, who's observing the mind, that's the Buddha, so to speak, the enlightened aspect of mind, big mind. Where the thoughts going through and passions or cloud passing through an empty sky, so to speak. So, I haven't dealt with my own poetry. I almost avoided that. There's something we can do with that now.

Wurmser: The class has been exposed to *Howl*, but I think they'd like to hear what you have to say about it.

Ginsberg: Well, one thing I could do is read one section of *Howl* ... second, which is modeled on the exaltation of the Shelley. It was a model for the Shelley, the Moloch

section, which is not the best-known section, usually, it's a sort of stereotype thing of "I saw the best minds of my generation" as a sort of stereotype, usually misunderstood, because there's a good deal of irony in that and I mean it isn't "starving mystical naked"; it's "starving hysterical naked." People don't quite get that sometimes. So, the having given a catalog of people who freaked out or were lost or instances, specific instances of breakdown, madness, tragedy, destruction, comedy maybe, might be comedy. Then the question is what has caused this in America? What is the root of this? What is the condition that creates this sense of alienation and crack up? Even to a point where nowadays we have a kind crack up of the entire nation. In a sense, what Carter got voted out of office for naming the malaise, how the fundamentalists are taking up as...Somebody on top of the sound?³⁸ Can somebody check the machinery? Somebody who knows anything about the machinery? Is there a sound person here? Is there a sound person here? That any better?

Okay, so the question is what's the problem? It starts with naming something external, Moloch. You all know who Moloch is? The Canaanite god to whom children were sacrificed. Actually, originally this was a brass god with goat horns, sort of devilish in that way, seven furnaces in the belly, where children were sacrificed in brass. Leviticus says that "Thou shall not let thy seed pass through the black fire to Moloch," not to sacrifice to Moloch. So it begins with an external being, divinity, Moloch. Identified with hyper-technology, hyper-industrialization, but really resolves itself with escaping Moloch within the mind and then, I guess that's the climatic statement of the entire poem, Moloch within the mind. Don't let anybody ever tell you that ... it's outside ... finally the focus is on those elements consciousness and the crux or site of the problem³⁹:

[Allen Ginsberg reads Section II of *Howl* 15:501-19:32]

So I don't know if you get [Applause] get the relationship of the vocal exuberance of the "Ode to the West Wind" or some of the Shelley poems and the structure of "Howl," but the key again is to get enough breath, you know, to follow the breathing if you're reading it aloud, to follow the punctuation so that you have enough breath so that you can build and build and build in terms of pitch of vowel, that builds musically, "What sphinx of cement and aluminum" all the way up to "monstrous bomb." You know, whatever goes up. I guess, the most interesting line for a single breath is "Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!"⁴⁰ Dactyl, dactylic lines, the line that Homer used, the reverse forms there, the rhythms are probably more like Greek, classic Greek rhythm,

³⁸ There are technical difficulties with the sound equipment.

³⁹ There are gaps here due to poor sound quality.

⁴⁰ Ginsberg counts out the beat of the line.

dithyrambic and coriambic rhythm than the simplistic rhythms that the new formalist conservatives would like to reimpose on poetry, the limited gambit of iambs and counter stress trochees. So, it's kind of interesting that you can build a kind of a kinetic or exuberant vocal line. I think that's something that was suppressed or not featured in poetry. Williams exploded poetic form and like the splitting of the atom, released a tremendous amount of energy by opening up the poetic form to the complete range of the human voice instead of a limited gambit⁴¹ that you might have in a sonnet or quatrain. And I think Kerouac extended it even further because his mind is so associational you know, improvisation. Kerouac is more writing the mind; Williams is writing American speech. Kerouac is writing American mind flow, so to speak, now then Cassady I think, intervened here and was the catalyst for Kerouac's unintended mind flow.

Ginsberg: What's up next? How much time do we have left ? [Checks watch]

Dr. Wurmser: Do you want to take a ... look there's a question there.

6th Questioner: You serious? I was wondering if you could describe further the experiences in *The Yage Letters*, with you and Burroughs. *Yage*⁴², sorry.

Ginsberg: Well, everybody who dropped acid felt the same psychedelic. Psychedelic is psychedelic. The thing there is though you might call it an extension of diet rather than taking drugs. You might think of peyote or mushrooms as an extension of diet. That's macrobiotics. I eat a macrobiotic diet and it gives you a different morale and then some. You eat meat then you carry that meat in your soul. You eat macrobiotic you carry it kind of ...⁴³ pure sense of your morale changes and your perception changes. The Yage and peyote cactus were used as purgatives, you know, make you throw up, throw up is important. The initial effect is nausea. You know once you vomited out the poison and you perhaps see some panoramic sense of the cosmos or alternative mind. But I don't think you need to do it more than a few times. I remember once talking to Dr. Albert Hofmann who invented LSD. He said he had only taken it 6 or 7 times. I asked him, "how come not more?" "Well once you get the glimpse, how often do you have to take one to open the window? Once you have the experience, how many times are you going to keep it opening."⁴⁴ I remember the great French poet, Henri Michaux, who experimented a lot with mescaline saying that he wasn't so much interested in what kind of vision people had on mescaline; he was more interested in what they did with it the next day. What they were able to build on, a more permanent perception that they got if they could do so. Day-to-day violence, that would be unfortunate. Whereas one problem of the American psychedelic would be... getting clean would be a bit more important than provocation whatever insight you got. So, the spiritual

⁴¹ The sound is unclear here, so this word choice might not be accurate.

⁴² Questioner corrects his pronunciation.

⁴³ Audio quality is poor, and this phrasing is indecipherable.

⁴⁴ Audio quality continues to be poor and certain phrasing is indecipherable

materialism of counting your visions as if they were gold or something. I had six visions; I took acid 200 times before it. But you know, finally nothing comes from it—art or marriage, or armies or whatever. So, it's a question of what grounding to hear the visionary mind that's a statement embroidered in Zen. There's the notion of satori, a big mind, that satori is something that comes and goes, you don't cultivate satori; it's a place of how you ground it, how you work for it, how you apply it, rather than how you get a gold star for having it.

Can everybody hear? Okay, so in this case, panoramic awareness. Awareness of the space of this room, so that you're addressing the person furthest away from you, so that they can hear.

7th Questioner: I was reading a book where you described the Beat movement as a revolt against the machine?

Ginsberg: Did I? I made a lot of descriptions, but I don't think it's that simple. Not my word, not revolt, I would say against hyper-technology, that's my opinion on it.

7th Questioner: Well, I was just wondering at what age you started thinking that something was wrong within the American dream and like...

Ginsberg: Not the American dream the whole world dreams that. The machine needs the hyper-technology.

7th Questioner: Well, is there like a specific instance that you were like describing?

Ginsberg: Sort of, a couple, a lot of them, accumulative. A friend of mine got into trouble and was arrested by the police when I was very young, and I realized that...Can you hear me?

[break to fix the microphone]

Okay so, the question was, when incidents, accumulative incidents, that took me out of my so-called dogmatic slumbers—a lot of them. I grew up wanting to be a labor lawyer from having remembered from New Jersey, Paterson silk strikes; my mother imparted the history of workers struggles against the bosses; the use of police with go guns to strike break and the attempted destruction of the labor movement and I wanted to be a labor lawyer. When I was telling Kerouac about that one day he said, "listen you've never been in a factory in your life, you've never been a laborer, you don't know anything about labor, what are you, what kind of high school ambition is this? To be a labor lawyer when you don't know anything about labor, you have nothing to know. You're the son of a high school teacher and you haven't done a day's work in your life except in the library putting books back on the shelf for 13 cents an hour in 1937." I suddenly realized that I was living in a kind of daydream. So, it's an awakening of my own mind. Then a friend of mine got busted and

sent to jail for manslaughter and I realized that the law, though as a generalization, the law might be good. It didn't fit that case. You know that the law really had nothing to do with what was going on there, that was like a tragedy of another dimension in another human realm. That all the law was a bunch of abstract rules that people pay to follow those abstract rules whether or not they fit the situation. Then, got into a conversation about, is art social? Does it require an audience or is it solipsistic? If you carve a walking stick, is that art? If you put the walking stick on the moon where nobody saw it, would that still be art? And as an old lefty I said, "it's got to be social" and there was this friend I was with, who was smarter than me who said, "it's got to be solipsistic, art for art's sake." Then we took our argument to Burroughs, and he said "Tis too starved an argument for my sword" in the words of the immortal bard. Then he explained, art is a three-letter word, you're arguing about what art is as if it is something, but art is anything you want to define it, you got to agree how you want to define the three-letter word. It's not a word which has a built-in essence from God that it means one thing, so it's whatever way you want to use the word. So, there's no point in arguing about beauty, truth, whatever, you know. How do you want to use the word? You want to define it as social or do you want to define it as both or do you want to define it as neither, what? See so those things were sort of breaking crust of my opinionation. You know, this sort of automatic knee jerk stereotype, buzzword, opinionation thoughts that I grew up with from high school or something. Then I remembered I finally met somebody who was a junkie and I realized that he was sick then it was like medicine. That he needed medicine, like diabetes, and that I said, "you should go to a doctor for a cure." He said, "oh doctors don't treat junkies anymore. They used to until 1935, then the treasury department narcotics bureau drove them out of business." I said, "you mean they violated their Hippocratic oath to cure people or see people who are sick?" And he said, "yeah, the government intruded on it." I realized that it was that the whole drug thing was a scam. Then around the same time I smoked some pot and realized that the whole government idea of pot was a scam too. That it was something that you know drove you to insanity, frothing at the mouth, all that ...⁴⁵. So, I began questioning the whole set up of ideas that were laid on me by the media, by the government. And then I was gay, and I realized that that was normal; it was me or something. What was all the big fuss about? Why was that considered criminal or what a law about it? What shameful? And I just woke up and said, "what-who put this scam on everybody?" And if drugs, grass, and sex ... that the government and the media have such a perverted view of grass and sex, then what about money? Then I began reading Ezra Pound on money and usury. And what about war? And what about the military? And what about you know, everything? About Chinese medicine, about everything, about poetry. Then around the 1950s, I began noticing the military budget was creeping up and up and up and then the military was beginning to take over the country as sort of the central God or reference point, as if that had more authority than anybody else. And by 1959, *Life Magazine* came around to interview us, the Beat generation writers, and I said, "I always thought I was on to something, but if *Life Magazine* thinks that we're interesting, they must be awfully impoverished of mind." They must be in a bad way if they think that we know something.

⁴⁵ Ginsberg's voice trails off which makes it difficult to transcribe the end of this point.

They think that we got an official sort of ... a newspeak magazine seems to think that we got something going. I remember lying in bed trembling, with the responsibility, realizing that America was completely nuts. That it was our job to make some change, you know, to break through the crust of habitual thinking and begin thinking you know, what really, where is our heart? Where is compassion? Where is feeling? Where is subject? Well, who are we? What is all this stuff about? You know, like dope fiends. The notion of classifying a human being as a fiend, like a witch, but a fiend. You think the word fiend, dope fiend, the common modification for somebody who maybe smokes grass, dope fiend. The notion of a fiend, a human fiend, seems to me so nightmarishly, outrageously, insulting to any human spirit, anybody in trouble, somebody who was sick or something. One thing after another like that. Then I was in Vietnam in 63 and talked to most of the reporters there like David Halberstam who became famous for books later. In 1963 they said that it was impossible to win the war that the Vietnamese didn't like us. Anyway, the Vietnamese were allied not with the Chinese, but with the Russians against the Chinese, because there was always a fight between the Chinese and the Russians. I mean the Chinese and the Vietnamese over borders. I came back home, and I kept hearing about the containing China, by arming the South Vietnamese against the monolithic Vietnamese Chinese block. It made no sense at all you know. Are you following what I'm saying? The mythology then was that the Chinese and the Vietnamese were all communist gooks, together, against us and that actually the Vietnamese were fighting with, historically fighting with the Chinese and had allied with the Russians against the Chinese. So, if we wanted to contain China, which was the dumbest containment policy if you ever heard that phrase. The best thing to do is to give Ho Chi Minh a lot of money. All you got to do is give a lot of money to contain China instead of fighting them, which is what we're doing now.

So, I realized that everybody that was running everything was a bunch of dopes. Total blunders in every department and it was all covered over by some kind of by officialese language. So the officialese language that was being used, as described by Orwell, is generally use of abstraction to cover over specific information, specific reality and that the generalization and abstraction of officialese was actually a kind of hallucination and it all goes back to something that William Blake says, "labor well the Minute Particulars, take care of the Little Ones, generalization and abstraction is the plea of the hypocrite named scoundrel, for Art and Science cannot be organized but in minutely organized particulars."⁴⁶ And that fits in with the poetics that I described in William Carlos Williams, "no ideas but in things," no ideas but in minute particular details, direct perception. So, I began to distrust large abstract windy generalizations from the media, or from science, from anywhere and appreciate contradiction at the same time—negative capability. So that it finally gets more and more garish when you see the neo-conservatives claiming that this is a Christian country and it should be going by God, their God, they're the interpreters of who the God is.

⁴⁶Here Ginsberg recounts portions of Blake's "The Holiness of Particulars" from "Jerusalem."
(<https://www.bartleby.com/lit-hub/william-blake/the-holiness-of-minute-particulars/>)

It's like the weirdest sort of schizophrenia, and they've got a lot of power now. They got a lot of power over people's minds because they own all these television and radio stations. They're blathering constantly because they're the only people with enough aggression to want to take over. Everybody else is you know, already dizzy with the horrors that we created on the planet, and you know, wanting to, you know, maybe let go a little bit and not pursue an aggressive control policy and here are these last fanatics, like the Ayatollahs and Pat Robertson. Well, same fundamentalist fanatics claiming to speak for some noble daddy, up there somewhere else, and claiming to speak for them, claiming that their book, the Bible or the Quran is The Word and everybody else gotta obey it. It's just like the Stalinist with the Marxist theory, so they are all Stalinoids actually. Pat Robertson has a Stalinoid mentality, and his language is the same particularly in attacking art. Stalin's attack on art was on you know the greatest poets that he sent to the concentration camps. They were elitist individuals, individualists. Cosmopolitans and elitist individuals and that's exactly the phrasing that Newt Gingrich is using against the artist with the NEA, that this is an elitist, bunch of elitist individuals, why should the taxpayer have to pay for these elitist individuals? Why should the Russian government have to sort of put-up money for degenerate elitist individuals like Akhmadulina or Mayakovsky or any of the great writers that they sent to camp? And Hitler had the idea for what ... degenerate art, Jesse Helm's phrase too. Or spiritual corruption, that was Mao Zedong's phrase. It's the same mentality and I have no doubt if those guys took over, they'd have concentration camps and mass deaths also because they believe that they have the word of God just like Stalin believed he had the word from the from Marx, although he was faking it. Mao thought he was the ultimate arbiter of what was reality. These guys think that there's one reality. There's no sense of negative capability—two things can exist in the same mind at the same time. They have no sense of that but are trying to impose a monotheist-absolutism known in the American East as the inerrancy theory of the Bible. Inerrancy, the Bible is making no errors, and you have to go back to that. That's Pat Robertson's basic thing, trained by, there's a guy behind it all, actually. There's one elder power behind the throne who trained Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Falwell. Ever hear of that? The Reverend W.A. Criswell, anybody ever heard of him? Criswell? I think he's got a church of inerrancy or something like that in California. The two guys, a guy, William Rush Dewey and another guy that I was talking about Criswell, who actually were the mentors of all these fundamentalist, televangelist, Theo-politicians. I think they have the same capacity for concentration camps because they believe that they are divinely inspired to the extent that they're not hypocrites. You know, they'd be better off as hypocrites, maybe giving them the credit for being sincere. 50/50: are they hypocrites or are they sincere? Do they really believe what they're saying? Who knows? Don't even know. That's the worst part of it. If it's just a conscious scam or whether they really believe that shit. They say the Bible is un-inerrant, the world was born in 4004 BC and not even as a

symbol, but you know, as a literal thing. So, we're faced with that, and I think that's why there is such a renaissance of interest in the Beat generation because the Beat generation had a lot of individualists who had a sense of humor and tolerance and variety—sexually and metaphysically—and respect for spirit and respect for medication and an actual interest in examining the mind. And above all an interest in curbing our own aggression. And apparently the mentality of the All-American spirit from Reagan on up is that, in a free market, aggression is very important. Aggression wins. Aggression is the macho character rather than a generosity of spirit or openness of spirit. There does seem to be a Darwinian aggression psychology that's being cultivated politically and psychologically in the country, reinforced by television, reinforced by all this mental aggression of “I'm talking for God, and I know God and you don't know God.” So, we're in for what Pat Buchanan does call a spiritual battle, a battle for the soul of America. It's really interesting and I think very often, very early, a lot of the Beat writers realized that, that there was, probably that's Whitman when he says that unless in the preface to *Democratic Vistas*, where he says that unless citizens developed affection for each other, actual affection of a glue for democracy, this nation was doomed to an impotence and a status among, his phrase, the damned of nations, “among the damned of nations” because we have so much power. What's the remedy? He suggests—tenderness. What's the remedy the right winger suggests? Certainly, it isn't tenderness; it's some kind of moralistic, harsh, judgmental, put down, sour puss thing. I think the Beat generation people prefer to feel more glee.

8th Questioner: Were there ever any minority black Beats, in the line of Leroi Jones Amiri Baraka⁴⁷?

Ginsberg: Quite interesting. In the 60s there was quite a liaison, during Baraka's time, between the black musicians and the white poets, black poets and white poets like A.B. Spellman, David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, among others of the famous black poets. Ted Joans shows up all the time; he's in New York now. There are quite a few women poets that were cultivated in the end, survived; it isn't well known. Very few people have read Diane Di Prima, a great poet. And of the later generation Anne Waldman, the next generation down.

9th Questioner: Respecting the influence that you and your Beat generation have to sort of give a voice to a counterculture or something that...

Ginsberg: We're giving a voice to our own subjective perceptions as individuals, but everybody has subjective perceptions, so it gets generalized to be called, well that's the

⁴⁷ The questioner's voice trails off; it's unclear if he references Baraka or a different poet here.

counterculture because it isn't like television. It's not a counterculture, I think it's the main culture. The television is some kind of a cancer.

9th Questioner: Yes, I wish you were not a counterculture but...

Ginsberg: But we did have a party line and a unified view.

9th questioner: Right, but you gave voice and, in a sense, unified a lot of us...

Ginsberg: Yeah. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."⁴⁸ Or, the old saying, "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed."⁴⁹ Somebody says something that's real, everybody says, oh yeah, I thought that too.

9th Questioner: About I think, two years ago, I heard Ram Dass speak at Princeton and his phrase was if you thought the 60s were something, wait until the '90s.

Ginsberg: Well, he's always sort of like dramatizing.

9th Questioner: My real question is, do you see young people today finding a voice, like the poets in your generation? Do you see that capability to galvanize us?

Ginsberg: Yeah actually, among the younger poets that I like, there's a young music poet called Beck. Anybody know him? He's like a really good poet and really unique and individual and goes back to old blues traditions. Would you count him a poet? I think he's really interesting. There's a 19-year-old kid in Chapel Hill called, Jeff Mayno, who just astounded me with a couple of, two pamphlets in a row. One was written when he was 18; one when he was 19 and published it. That were amazing poems, that really blew my mind and actually made me cry. It was still nice.

Previous generations have always turned up like one generation after mine, the two I know, there's Anne Waldman, Ed Sanders, Ted Berrigan, Bob Dylan, the whole, the Beatles, who were all poets with music or without. Following that but they're not, they haven't been picked up on properly by the academy, they're not in anthologies yet—poets like David Cope, Antler. Cope is ... where is he? Michigan. Antler, Milwaukee. There's a great poet I think, a very good poet, near great, in New Brunswick, Eliot Katz. He's a social worker there, writes long lines and social calls, really good, and was a sparkplug around Rutgers for a little while and is still there. There's a really interesting magazine from Hoboken called *The Long Shot* which carries a lot of these people. So, I think sure, you know first of all, there's such a renaissance of poetry reading and poetry workshops and rap and cafes and coffee shop readings, that the compost is there for the growth of a lot of genius. There's an

⁴⁸ Ginsberg quotes a line from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (Act III, Scene III).

⁴⁹ Ginsberg quotes from Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism."

audience. And so, a lot will grow out of that, and a lot has come as far as I can see. I don't think it's Maggie Estep particularly, goes to the Lollapalooza; she's more of an entertainer. So sure. Yes.

10th Questioner: Do you know consciousness?

Ginsberg: Do I know consciousness? Uh yeah, I know consciousness—here we are. I don't think I'm a Buddha. I don't know the extent of it.

10th Questioner: Do you know the subconscious?

Ginsberg: I don't think there is one. My mind is open to itself.

10th Questioner: You don't believe in the subconscious whatsoever?

Ginsberg: Well, believe, what is the word “believe in”? I don't know what the word, what is “believe in”? Consider the word “believe in.” That means that I believe in something that I haven't seen; it's a subconscious. That there's a subconscious that I'm not in contact with except intermittently and I believe it's there or I believe in it. Well, I have dreams, I don't know where they come from but is that subconscious? It's a word, but the Buddhist have another word, unborn. You can't trace it to its womb. Can't trace it to its origin. That's just as good as the word, subconscious, but I think that we are much more aware of everything that goes on in our mind than people make out. You know, everybody is aware of wanting to screw their mother or brother or sister. Everybody's had that dream. Very few people have suppressed it 100% that it's totally unfamiliar and reprehensible. It's just ordinary, everyday mind, it's no big deal, you know. Maybe saying, calling the subconscious is like making it a big deal as if it's something secret that nobody has noticed before. I mean what is a subconscious? Repressed, something about repressed emotion, like screw your mother, be screwed by your father something like that the worst that you, incest. Pardon me.

10th Questioner: I would just think of it as things that isn't really picked up in your conscious perception.

Ginsberg: Well, it's the, you know, the whole point of those spots of time of Wordsworth are things that are there that you didn't quite notice but they're there and you think of them once every couple months. Is that subconscious or is that conscious?

10th Questioner: Well, it's conscious if you can recollect it.

Ginsberg: Yeah, but then, what if you're stoned? Well yeah, but that's just another thought, so I won't cultivate that. So, I think there is a question of meditation, of cultivating mindfulness, cultivating awareness. Cultivating awareness of what's going through your mind. I mean that could be sharpened but I don't think anything's ever totally submerged in

the darkness of some mythical subconscious that never comes to surface and you never notice it. I mean people notice everything, but they don't notice what they notice.

10th Questioner: would you recommend a holding of that perception either in meditation or psychedelic or...?

Ginsberg: Well meditation or art. I don't think that the drugs do that much good. Maybe once or twice but that's about it, but the problem is people get hung up on the sensation of the drug and it negates somewhere and it becomes like chasing their own tails, running after their own shadow. Yeah.

11th Questioner: Do you still correspond with any of the surviving Beats? Burroughs maybe?

Ginsberg: Well, we don't write much. We talk to each other all the time. I visit Burroughs once a year and I call him up every month, gossip. Gregory Corso lives down across town from me and I see him, talked to him last week. Ferlinghetti, I see when I go there or we talk on the phone, or we do write because he's far away. Gary Snyder, I got a letter from him yesterday and our mutual Japanese new friend, Nanao Sakaki, a great poet, is coming to New York and was looking for places to read and needs \$500 to read if anybody's got a reading date open, a great Japanese poet. I visited Philip Whalen about a month ago in San Francisco. He's now the abbot of the Zen center, Hartford Street and a Zen master now. McClure I see all the time sometimes go out with and give readings with, but we had a Center see at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. And last year we had Ferlinghetti, all together, one time, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, Francesco Clemente the painter, Philip Glass the musician, McClure, myself, Anne Waldman, Anselm Hollo. What other poets? A whole bunch of poets. We see each other all the time. And the function of Naropa Institute is to have a place in the middle of the country where we can assemble and crisscross with each other and actually pass on to younger generations what we learned ourselves in traditional Buddhist way. The lineage, sense of lineage, passing on in a lineage or affiliation and a place to connect, under Buddhist auspices basically. So yeah, we see each other all the time. Actually, you know most of the people that are called Beat generation writers are still alive and very active at this point more than ever. Jack Kerouac died and Cassady died, and Lou Welch died. All three of them alcohol, not drugs but alcohol, amazingly. The drug alcohol, the official drug, the government drug, but nobody died from anything else. Herbert Huncke, you know, original Beat person, 80 years old now living at the Chelsea Hotel still strung out. Burroughs is 81 and just put, finished his last book, just came out, *My Education*, it's called, and Gary Snyder is finishing his lifelong epic work, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. He just

concluded it this year and it'll be published probably a year from now. So, everybody's at the peak of their activity at this point. It's quite amazing.

Wurmser: I wanted to stand up here. This is a good chance for me to jump in. This two hours that we spent, or over two hours, has been quite amazing. I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did.

Ginsberg: I'd like to read a last poem.

Wurmser: You can!

Ginsberg: This is a paraphrase of a baul poetry. Poetry written by a sort of a Northern Bengali, wandering minstrel writer called Baul. They were a big influence on Rabindranath Tagore earlier in the century and they wear patchwork clothes and carry a one stringed instrument, ektara, and they sing devotional songs to Krishna, Buddha, Allah, Christ, their own feet, their own noses, their girlfriend, the bridge. So, I read a book of poetry by Lalon Shah, and I made some imitations of the translation. I read the book, and I kept waking up at night with more ideas and I like to read some poems like this one. This is a series of short, "After Lalon."

[Allen Ginsberg reads "After Lalon" parts I-IV and half of V before video cuts]⁵⁰

⁵⁰ This is the remainder of the poem that appears to be cut off on the video.

...weak heart leaky kidney?
 Who's been doing time
 for 65 years
 in this corpse? Who else went
 into ecstasy besides me?
 Now it's all over soon,
 what good was all that come?
 Will it come true? Will
 it really come true?

VI

I had my chance and lost it,
 many chances & didn't
 take them seriously enuf.
 Oh yes I was impressed, almost
 went mad with fear
 I'd lose the immortal chance,
 One lost it.
 Allen Ginsberg warns you
 don't follow my path
 to extinction.