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ALLEN GINSBERG'S PAUL CEZANNE
AND THE PATER OMNIPOTENS AETERNA DEUS

Paul Portugés

I

I got hung up on Cézanne around 1949 in my last year at Columbia, studying with Meyer Shapiro . . . I think it was about the same time I was having these Blake visions.¹

In 1948 Allen Ginsberg was completing his last year as a student of literature at Columbia University. The previous summer he had experienced several visionary illuminations under the spiritual guidance of what he perceived as the poet William Blake's raised-from-the-dead, spectral voice. Ginsberg had heard a God-like, cosmic voice; his body had become suffused with supernatural light; and he had, willingly or not, undergone extraordinary, irreversible changes in his personality and his powers of understanding.

One of the many vows he had taken that fateful summer (the mystical experiences were interspersed over several vision-haunted weeks) was the dedication of himself to the investigation of unusual modalities of consciousness. In particular, he wanted to explore states of mind that helped alter one's mundane perception and habits of thought. He began then, at twenty-two, a pursuit of mind-altering experiences that would come to have profound impact—not only on his own psychology, but also on his poetry and poetics.²

This was Ginsberg's state of mind when he enrolled in Professor

¹Allen Ginsberg, "The Art of Poetry," *The Paris Review*, 10, No. 37 (Spring 1966), p. 24; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

²A full account of Ginsberg's Blake visions is given in my *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross Erickson Publications, 1979).

Meyer Shapiro's course on modern art in the fall of 1948. Attracted to the dynamic intelligence of his teacher, Ginsberg became entranced by Shapiro's lectures about the considerable impact the postimpressionist Paul Cézanne had made on modern art. Ginsberg, a young sonneteer of modest acclaim (he had won literary awards for his Elizabethan-style sonnets earlier that year), was particularly interested in Shapiro's comments about Cézanne's experiments in perception—specifically his use of perspective, form, and color modulation to alter his own and his viewer's appreciation of the phenomenal world.

Though Shapiro was alarmed by Ginsberg's insistence that he had actually heard Blake's voice and that his own intelligence had increased several-fold as a result of this mystical encounter, the good professor encouraged the young poet (and *magna cum laude* student) to pursue the visionary side of Cézanne—if indeed there really was such an element in the introverted painter's theories and works. He instructed Ginsberg to go to the Museum of Modern Art and study first-hand some of Cézanne's paintings.

The next few days Ginsberg spent several hours each morning and afternoon pondering the strange canvases of the difficult French painter. While gazing at one of Cézanne's landscapes, Ginsberg began to feel a strange sensation—not unlike the feelings he had had during his Blake visions the previous summer in his sublet Harlem apartment: “there's a strange sensation that one gets, looking at his [Cézanne's] canvases, which I began to associate with the extraordinary sensation—cosmic sensation, in fact—that I had experienced catalyzed by Blake's *Sunflower* and *Sick Rose* and a few other poems” (p. 25). This “cosmic sensation” he felt while peering into Cézanne's landscapes was a “strange shuddering impression” and a “sudden shift, a flashing” in his mind that created a momentary “gap” in consciousness caused by the “space gap” in Cézanne's paintings: “Partly it's when the canvas opens up into three dimensions and looks like wooden objects, . . . in three dimensions rather than flat. Partly it's the enormous spaces which open up in Cézanne's landscapes” (pp. 27–29, 25).

Because he associated the strange feelings he got from Cézanne with his Blake visions, Ginsberg felt doubly obligated to find out exactly how Cézanne created these “strange shudderings” in his mind—how he could induce a momentary gap in consciousness simply by playing with color, perspective, and form.

Thus began Ginsberg's dedicated study of Cézanne's techniques,

his “intentions and method” (p. 26). Ginsberg examined all the reproductions he could find. Shapiro suggested he study Erle Loran’s *Cézanne’s Composition*, a fascinating account of Cézanne’s inventive composition techniques by a young painter who had himself lived and worked in Cézanne’s atelier in Aix-en-Provence. Loran discusses in detail, often using photographs of Cézanne’s subjects, the great master’s use of color modulation, distorted perspective, and geometric patterning.

In his book Loran includes a photograph of Cézanne’s workspace. The usual artist’s paraphernalia is evident—in Cézanne’s case one’s eye is attracted to the familiar bottles, draperies, and tables that appear in his many still lifes. But Ginsberg, in his spiritual state of mind, immediately focused on a human skull, a big black hat, and the artist’s cloak. For the young poet, these items were proof positive that Cézanne must have been engaged in some sort of alchemical study, that Cézanne was not a plodding dullard as Ginsberg had been led to believe. Instead, he was convinced that Cézanne was a “hermetic type” like himself, someone devoted to the systematic study of the mystical in the natural world.

Ginsberg’s interest in the mystical actually predates his visions in the summer of 1948. In 1945, as a lower division student, he became a dedicated follower of Zen and Gnosticism under the guidance of Columbia professor Raymond Weaver. Weaver and Ginsberg, along with Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, would often meet outside the classroom and discuss Plotinus, Egyptian astrology, and other esoteric subjects. Ginsberg balanced his Gnostic interest with a vigorous study of Oswald Spengler. The combination of Spengler’s cyclical view of history and the Gnostic search for a “Supreme Reality”³ were the foundation upon which Ginsberg built his respect for, adoration of, and theories about Paul Cézanne.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Ginsberg studied Cézanne’s “The Black Clock,” he imposed a Plotinian framework on the rather dull still life of a simple black clock surrounded by such items as a vase, coffee cup, and large shell. Here Cézanne fulfilled Ginsberg’s mystical needs; for in the painting he found all sorts of hidden meaning: “I began to see that Cézanne had literary symbolism in him, on and off. I was preoccupied with Plotinian terminology, of time and eternity, and I saw it in Cézanne’s paintings, an early painting of a clock on a shelf, which I associated with time and

³Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 79.

eternity, and I began to think he was a big secret mystic” (p. 26). The painting is a study in the play of light and dark in which Cézanne paid particular attention to variations in cool and warm colors. However, for some reason (perhaps the actual clock was broken), Cézanne portrayed the black clock without any hands—a timeless time piece. Ginsberg immediately deduced that the painting was a statement on reality as transcendental, with Cézanne suggesting a perfect Plotinian other world of timelessness and eternal transcendence.

Another painting that interested Ginsberg because of its “Plotinian terminology” was Cézanne’s “The Landscape at La Rouche Fuyon.” The painting is an experiment in the manipulation of two and three dimensional planes that interact to give the viewer a distinct three-dimensional feeling—a marvelous technique that Cézanne pioneered. The painting impressed Ginsberg for two reasons. While studying it at length, he would feel a “strange shuddering,” the gap in consciousness mentioned earlier. In addition, he was fascinated by the winding road that turns off and out of the painting’s borders. To the young student of Gnostic thought, this road was a “mystical path” suggesting a journey into the netherworld of secret knowledge, a world beyond time and eternity. Ginsberg’s preoccupation with Cézanne’s mystical themes (whether real or imagined) led him to write a minor, short poem entitled “Cézanne’s Ports”:

In the foreground we see time and life
swept in a race
toward the left hand side of the picture
where shore meets shore.

But that meeting place
isn’t represented;
it doesn’t occur on the canvas.

For the other side of the bay
is Heaven and Eternity,
with a bleak white haze over its mountains.

And the immense water of L’Estaque is a go-between
for minute rowboats.⁴

Here Ginsberg is obviously mystified by Cézanne’s overall composition technique so superbly plotted in his 1886 landscape “The

⁴Collected in *Empty Mirror* (New York: Totem Press in association with Corinth Books, 1961), p. 10.

Bay from L'Estaque." As Shapiro himself has commented, this painting is "without paths or human figures, the world is spread out before his eyes, a theme for pure looking."⁵ The interesting point about Ginsberg's poem is his preoccupation with what "doesn't occur on the canvas." He proposes that Cézanne is enticing the reader into a "Heaven and Eternity" that isn't represented on canvas but skillfully suggested by the artist's hermetic method.

Whether or not Ginsberg is "correct" in his interpretation is of little consequence. What is important is that his feelings, intuitions, and musings on Cézanne's methods and intentions inspired him to investigate such possibilities for his own poetry. Ginsberg sought to develop a poetry that would help the reader find "Heaven and Eternity" not beyond the borders of the canvas but between the lines and images of a poem.

During the course of his studies, Ginsberg went to the Museum of Modern Art one day while under the suggestive influence of a "lot of marijuana." While studying "The Rocks at Garonne," he began "turning on to space in Cézanne." He began to feel disoriented as he stared at the painting, receiving a "very mysterious impression" from the rocks: "you look at them for a while, and after a while they seem like they're rocks, just the rock parts, you don't know where they are, whether they're on the ground or in the air or on top of a cliff, but then they seem to be floating in space like clouds, and then they seem to be also a bit like they're amorphous, like kneecaps or cockheads or faces without eyes" (p. 27). Ginsberg was likewise impressed by "The Card Players." As in the other paintings, he found "all sorts of sinister symbols," including a portrayal of death, a "fat-faced Kafkaian-agent . . . a cosmic card sharp dealing out Fate" (pp. 26–27).

Since Cézanne's paintings had such an overwhelming effect on Ginsberg, he decided to search for material that would shed some light on the painter's ability to produce such a profound impression. Ginsberg began by studying Cézanne's letters, hoping to discover a preoccupation with "Time and Eternity" similar to his own. Not surprisingly he found what he was looking for in a letter quoted in Loran's *Cézanne's Composition*: "I'm an old man and my passions are not, my senses are not coarsened by passions like some *other* old men I know, and I have worked for years trying to . . . *reconstitute* the *petites sensations* that I get from nature" (p. 27). Ginsberg concluded

⁵Meyer Shapiro, *Paul Cézanne* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1952), p. 62.

from this statement that Cézanne was no longer concerned with re-creating nature but that he had refined his perceptions to the degree that he was concerned with actually painting his perception of nature—that he was literally intent on painting his emotions (*sensations*), rather than attempting a photographic rendering. To the young Ginsberg, Cézanne had the phenomenological capacity to refine his perception to such a degree that the painter had mastered “optical phenomena in an almost yogic way . . . actually looking at his own eyeballs in a sense” (pp. 27–28).

Another of Cézanne’s letters attracted Ginsberg’s imagination. Writing to his friend Emile Bernard, Cézanne explained how he had used geometric composition to create a unique portrayal of perspective:

[B]y means of squares, cubes, triangles, I try to reconstitute the impression that I have from nature: the means that I use to reconstitute the impression of solidity that I think-feel-see when I am looking at a motif like Victoire, is to reduce it to some kind of pictorial language, so I use these squares, cubes, triangles, but I try to interknit so that *no light gets through*.⁶

Ginsberg was quite mystified by this famous statement the painter made in his later years. He deduced Cézanne “produced a solid two-dimensional surface” that made it possible to look into it and see a three-dimensional opening:

[Cézanne contained] in his skull these supernatural phenomena, and observations . . . you know, and it’s very humble actually, because he didn’t know if he was crazy or not—that is a flash of the physical, miracle dimensions of existence, trying to reduce that to canvas in two dimensions, and then trying to do it in such a way as it would look if the observer looked at it long enough it would look like as much three dimensions as the actual *world* of optical phenomena when one looks through one’s eyes. Actually he’s *re-constituted* the whole fucking universe in his canvases (p. 28)

As we shall see in a later section, it would take Ginsberg years to transmute what he considered Cézanne’s “supernatural” method into his own poetry. Ginsberg not only had to discover for himself the verbal equivalent of Cézanne’s perceptual qualities and the technical ability to re-create such phenomena in his poetry; he also had to attempt one more fantastic quality of Cézanne’s method, the “Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus.”

⁶“The Art of Poetry,” p. 26. Ginsberg is paraphrasing Cézanne.

On April 15, 1904, Cézanne explained his theory of nature portrayal in a letter to Bernard:

May I repeat what I told you here: treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed towards a central point. Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth, that is a section of nature or, if you prefer, of the spectacle that the Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus spreads out before our eyes. Lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth. But nature for us men is more depth than surface whence the need of introducing into our light vibrations represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient amount of blue to give the impression of air.⁷

When Ginsberg read that Cézanne was attempting to find the “All-powerful Father, Eternal God” in his art, he immediately surmised that Cézanne had discovered a method of depicting the eternal in the everyday world. He believed that Cézanne’s experiment with “proper perspective” was actually a true discovery in perception that allowed the artist (and the viewer through the artist’s work) to go far beneath the surface of reality and bring forth the eternal, the all-powerful from nature:

[T]hat [the *pater omnipotens aeterna deus*] was I felt the key to Cézanne’s hermetic method . . . you realize that he’s really a saint! Working on his form of yoga, all that time, in obvious saintly circumstances of retirement in a small village . . . containing in his skull these supernatural phenomena, and observations. . . . (p. 28)

Ginsberg wanted to be that kind of saint; he wanted to show his readers supernatural phenomena, “the physical miracle of dimensions of existence.” Blake had accomplished such miracles in his poetry; Cézanne had created a similar effect in his paintings. How could Ginsberg create that “flash” in his work? What “form of yoga” could create a sense of the eternal in the quotidian world?

In 1954–55 Ginsberg discovered the answers to these questions while writing *Howl*. He had learned through various techniques to translate insights gained in his Blake and Cézanne studies into his own art form, for “*Howl* was really an homage to art but also in specific terms an homage to Cézanne’s method, in a sense I adapted what I could to writing” (p. 28).

⁷Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, ed. John Rewald (London: Bruno Cassirer, 1941), p. 234.

II

Cézanne: I have my motifs (he joins his hands).

A motif, you see, is this . . .

Gasquet: How's that?

Cézanne: Eh? Yes (he repeats his gesture, draws his hands apart, fingers spread out, and brings them together again, slowly, slowly. Then he joins them, presses them together, and contracts them, making them interlace). There you have it; that's what one must attain. If I pass too high or too low, all is ruined. There mustn't be a single link too loose, not a crevice through which may escape the emotion, the light, the truth . . . Our art ought to make us taste nature eternally.⁸

In 1872 a great change came over Paul Cézanne. He had spent his summer painting with his master-teacher, Camille Pissaro. In the fields near Auvers-sur-Oise, Pissaro taught his eager pupil to look at nature with a curious and contemplative gaze. He stressed the necessary mastery of an awareness of self; he insisted his student watch and record, be aware of the processes of thought, and observe the subtleties of personality adding its peculiar tinge to the interpretation of nature.

During this hot and instructive summer, the younger Cézanne learned to comprehend a reality beyond surfaces. He vowed to dedicate his art to a recreation of truth and a celebration of nature and the Eternal by allowing his emotions to be included in his portrayal of reality. He called his approach the "petite sensation." It was a phenomenological understanding and expression, a means of getting close to the eternal in the everyday, the sensation of the *Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus*.

Cézanne spent the rest of his career refining this preoccupation. He discovered and invented techniques of color modulation and model arrangement that, combined with his experiments in line and perspective, allowed him to portray a phenomenological self observing the secrets of the Eternal, the godliness of nature. In a conversation with Joachim Gasquet he described his method as a rendering of "emotion, the light, the truth."⁹

⁸Erle Loran, *Cézanne's Composition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1944), p. 15.

⁹Loran, p. 15.

Seventy-six years later Allen Ginsberg, already predisposed by his studies and visions, discovered Cézanne's experiments with his "petite sensations," his attempts to generate a feeling of the eternal truths in everyday reality. And for Ginsberg the experiments were successful, for the promising poet felt as though Cézanne had allowed him to glimpse the sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus—that "sudden shift, a flashing." Ginsberg began his own investigation of technique and power under the guidance of Cézanne's achievement.

He discovered in Cézanne's letters a formula for achieving this heightened perceptual ability. Cézanne was lecturing Emile Bernard about the awareness of light sensations on the eyeball: "an optical sensation is produced in our visual organ which causes us to classify the planes represented by color modulations into light, half-tone, or quarter-tone . . . Inevitably, while you proceed from black to white, the first of these abstractions being like something to lean on, for the eye as much as the brain, we flounder, we do not succeed in mastering ourselves, in ruling over ourselves."¹⁰

When Ginsberg read this passage, he deduced that Cézanne was capable of producing the sensation of the Eternal because he had trained himself accurately to reproduce the sensations of light traveling through his optic nerve after it entered the "organ of sight."¹¹ The key to Cézanne's hermetic method was an almost "yogic perception." The artist (or poet) learns an awareness of the actual physical operations of perception—the phenomenological ability of observing the self observing nature.

Ginsberg's ambition became to learn how to write during such heightened moments of attention. He felt, as did Cézanne, that it was possible to transcend and realize the essence of nature. The art involved in writing (or painting) was to learn how to commit the mind to absolute, "yoga-like" attention—a transcendental meditation technique: "The writing itself, the sacred act of writing, when you do anything of this nature, is like prayer. The act of writing being done sacramentally, if pursued over a few minutes, becomes like a meditation exercise which brings on a recall of detailed consciousness that is an approximation of high consciousness. High epiphanous mind. So, in other words, writing is a yoga that invokes Lord mind."¹²

¹⁰Loran, p. 10.

¹¹Loran, p. 10.

¹²"Craft Interview with Allen Ginsberg," in *The Craft of Poetry*, ed. William Packard (New York: Doubleday and Company), p. 73. Parenthetical page references, preceded by *Craft*, are to this work.

Writing is an exercise in perception that, if performed successfully, allows the practitioner to achieve “high consciousness,” “Lord mind.” First suggested in Cézanne’s letter to Bernard, the exercise involves awareness of the actual processes of the mind at work: “You observe your own mind during the time of composition and write down whatever goes through the ticker tape of mentality, or whatever you hear in the echo of your inner ear, or what flashes in picture on the eyeball while you’re writing” (*Craft*, p. 58). By paying attention to the forms of consciousness, the artist hopes to achieve a breakthrough in ordinary perception. The only stumbling block is self-consciousness, what Cézanne referred to as “distraction”: “If I feel the least distraction, the least weakness (or break in observation), above all if I interpret too much one day, if today I am carried away by a theory which is contrary to that of the day before, if I think while painting, if I intervene, why then everything is gone.”¹³

This is precisely Ginsberg’s theory of composition, in which the “art consists in paying attention to the actual movie of the mind” (*Craft*, p. 58). Like Cézanne, Ginsberg insists that he not be distracted that his attention always be focused. Self-consciousness is the great nemesis of this approach—indeed, rational thinking itself is a block because it gets in the way of a pure perception. The poet is the secretary of the consciousness and not its interpreter; he is dedicated to the transcription of the naked, honest, uncontrolled musings of thought and perception.

This method of writing has been dubbed “the spontaneous method of composition” by Ginsberg and by his tutor in prosody, Jack Kerouac. The approach is a commitment to unadulterated attention; the subject matter of the poem becomes the literal workings of the mind: “Such craft or art as there is, is in illuminating mental formations, and trying to observe the naked activity of my mind. Then transcribing the activity down on paper. So the craft is being shrewd at flashlighting mental activity. Trapping the archangel of the soul, by accident, so to speak. The subject matter is the action of my mind” (*Craft*, p. 57).

It took Ginsberg several years to comprehend and utilize the spontaneous method of composition. In 1954–55 as he composed *Howl*, he was still learning the process. At that time he was also engaged in a study of Buddhism in the course of which he discovered Sunyata, a similar approach to transcendental knowledge. Sunyata is

¹³Loran, p. 15.

the Buddhist formula for absence of rational, controlled mind. It is pure mind, the same kind of understanding that Cézanne demanded for his art—painting without distraction, an absolute absorption in the workings of perception. Sunyata is intuitive knowledge; the practitioner is a medium for enlightened sensations. The meditator, like the artist or poet of Ginsberg’s conception, trains his mind to watch and record various processes of thought—without conscious manipulation. When he is successful, flashes of eternal consciousness result.

Ginsberg’s studies in Buddhism brought him back to his earlier discoveries in Cézanne. His initial Blake visions convinced him that it was possible to achieve transcendental states. When these studies in consciousness finally cohered sometime in late 1954 or early 1955, the result was his great poem *Howl*. Written spontaneously (after several false starts), the poem makes use of the trancelike state of mind he had learned from his Cézanne studies and reconfirmed in his subsequent fascination with Buddhism. For Ginsberg, writing had become a successful form of “meditation or introspective yoga” that sought to discover the sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus.

III

Who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time and
space through images juxtaposed, and trapped
the archangel of the soul between 2 visual
images and joined the elemental verbs and set
the noun and dash of consciousness together
jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens
Aeterna Deus

from *Howl*

Ginsberg has said that the last part of *Howl* is an homage to Cézanne. He is referring to the stanza quoted above, with the allusions to his use of Cézanne’s “petite sensation” and the Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus. Actually the entire poem is a tribute to Cézanne because it is one of the first successful poems Ginsberg wrote using the spontaneous method of composition. But *Howl* is an homage to the great painter in another way. After Ginsberg had adapted the spontaneous method from his studies in Cézanne, he continued to ponder the possibilities of creating in his own poetry the “mysterious impression” that Cézanne had produced in him. Returning to Cézanne’s theories about perspective and color, Ginsberg

concluded that it was Cézanne's use of juxtaposition that was the key to his success: "[P]utting it very simply, that just as Cézanne doesn't use perspective lines to create space, but it's a juxtaposition of one color against another color . . . so, I had the idea . . . that by the unexplainable, unexplained non-perspective line, that is, juxtaposition of one *word* against another, a *gap* between the two words—like the space gap in the canvas—there'd be a gap between the two words which the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence" (p. 28). Such a method would allow the poet and reader to experience the Buddhist Sunyata: "I meant again if you place two images, two visual images side by side and let the mind connect them, the gap between the two images the lightning in the mind illuminates. It is the *Sunyata* . . ." (*Craft*, p. 57). The poet traps the "archangel of the soul between 2 visual images" to create a gap in consciousness that results in Sunyata; the Buddhist equivalent of Cézanne's *Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus*.

The idea of using juxtaposition as a major technique for his poetry was actually first suggested to Ginsberg by Erle Loran. In his analysis of Cézanne, Loran used the word *juxtaposition* to describe Cézanne's method of composition; he proposed, in terms that are almost identical to Ginsberg's descriptions, that Cézanne produced his "shimmering surface quality" and "luminous effect" by the "juxtaposition of multi-colored spots that create atmosphere and light."¹⁴ Loran concluded that this invention was a revolution in art of incomparable magnitude, indeed, one "of the most original achievements in the history of painting."¹⁵ Duly impressed, Ginsberg experimented for the next several years (1948–1955) with juxtaposition in imagery, diction, rhythm, and overall structure.

He and Jack Kerouac talked at length about the idea and concluded that the "gap" effect of juxtaposition was successfully achieved in poetry by the classical Japanese haiku writers. In haiku, "you have two distinct images, set side by side without drawing a logical connection between them: the *mind* fills in this . . . space" (p. 29). Ginsberg bought the four-volume set of Blyth's translations of haiku. He spent over a year trying to master the form by writing imitations of the best haiku by Basho, Buson, and Issa. The following haiku by Issa particularly startled him:

¹⁴Loran, p. 14.

¹⁵Loran, p. 24.

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

He felt that this enigmatic poem was a perfect example of the possibilities of juxtaposition, causing the gap in the mind that he so desired for his own poetry. His interpretation of the poem is a good insight into his belief that haiku has the potential of creating Sunyata through the juxtaposition of images: “Now you have the small ant and you have Mount Fujiyama and you have the ‘slowly, slowly’ and what happens is that you feel almost like . . . a cock in your mouth! You feel this enormous space-universe, it’s almost a tactile thing. Well, anyway, it’s a phenomenon-sensation” (p. 29).

Convinced that the secret of the desired “phenomenon-sensation” could be mastered in haiku, Ginsberg wrote over two dozen of them while he was writing *Howl*. Consider the following two examples:

The master
emerges from the movies;
the silent street

I don’t know the names
of the flowers—now
my garden is gone¹⁶

In the first haiku he juxtaposes the reality of the street with the person emerging from the fantasy world, the movie house. The clash between celluloid reality and the cold reality of deserted streets is supposed to cause a momentary “gap” or “space” in one’s sensibility. The reader should emerge with a glimpse of life at its barest. The second example is a similar attempt, juxtaposing the neglected garden with the poet’s realization that his garden is barren. Between the two images comes the realization that life passes us by before we realize its essence.

In *Howl* Ginsberg was hoping to accomplish the effect of haiku in combination with his spontaneous method of composition and its use of unaltered mind:

I was trying to do similar things with juxtapositions like “hydrogen jukebox.” Or “winter midnight smalltown streetlight rain.” Instead of

¹⁶The haiku are from a notebook Ginsberg showed to me in the summer of 1976.

cubes and squares and triangles . . . I have to reconstitute by means of words, rhythms, of course, and all that . . . The problem is then to reach the different parts of the mind, which are existing simultaneously, the different associations which are going on simultaneously, choosing elements from both, like: jazz, jukebox and all that, and we have the jukebox from that; politics, hydrogen bomb, and we have the hydrogen of that, you see “hydrogen jukebox” (p. 29).

The idea is to “reach different parts of the mind” that exist simultaneously and force them together to create a temporary suspension of habitual thought. The result is the gap that stops mind-flow, arrests normal consciousness, and creates a temporary void. The void is a sensation of *Sunyata*. Almost as if he were employing primitive magic, the poet tries to shock, scare, cajole, conjure, or seduce the reader. It is difficult to rationally explain “hydrogen jukebox”—even Ginsberg in the above quotation has a hard time of it. But, as in haiku, one isn’t supposed to explain it, not rationally. One is supposed to experience it. It is a visceral approach to poetry in which the mind rejects its own rational sensibility and undergoes a kind of organic alteration.

Ginsberg not only used juxtaposition with his imagery, but made it the basis of his structure. Stanza after stanza of *Howl* follows the others in no logical, predictable pattern. The structure is a series of irrational juxtapositions made with the purpose of altering consciousness itself—something Ginsberg has called an “electro-chemical reaction.” Like Artaud, he wanted a poetry that would stimulate in the reader an actual change in perception—at the physiological, chemical level if possible! That’s what he thought had happened to him with Blake (and to a lesser degree with Cézanne), and it is that effect he was after, ultimately, with the employment of juxtaposition, the use of spontaneous composition, and the approach to writing as a “sacred act”: “the idea that I had was that gaps in space and time through images juxtaposed, just as in the haiku which the mind connects in a flash, and so that *flash* is the *petite sensation* . . . The interesting thing would be to know if certain combinations of words and rhythms actually had an electro-chemical reaction on the body, which could catalyze specific states of consciousness. I think that’s what probably happened to me with Blake” (p. 30).

It is an interesting speculation. In fact, after he had mastered juxtaposition, spontaneous composition, and yogalike states of attention while writing, Ginsberg continued his studies in the

exploration of altered states of consciousness. In the late 1950s he experimented with several kinds of hallucinatory drugs, hoping to find new insights into the experience of the Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus. In 1962 he journeyed to the Far East to study mantra chanting, hoping to borrow certain Hindu techniques in order to achieve “ecstatic consciousness” in his poetry. In the mid-1970s he returned to Buddhism, searching for meditation techniques that would achieve the void, the Sunyata he so sincerely desired. These approaches to poetry are all part of the “pragmatic study of consciousness” that began with his Blake visions and his studies of Cézanne. His is a tradition of poetry intent on “the artful investigation . . . of extraordinary states of consciousness,” for Ginsberg believes, not unlike Blake, that the true function of poetry is “as a catalyst to visionary states of being” (*Craft*, pp. 69–70).

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