

Allen Ginsberg

(1926–1997)

Allen Ginsberg, like most poets, wrote poetry as a very personal exercise. It's "a form of discovering who I am," he said, "and getting beyond who I am to free awareness of consciousness, to a self that isn't who I am. It's a form of discovering my own nature, and my own identity, or my own ego. . . ."

The son of Louis Ginsberg, a schoolteacher and poet of conventional tendencies and modest reputation, Ginsberg was born in Newark, New Jersey. He was brought up in nearby Paterson, the industrial town given literary prominence by William Carlos Williams, the poet who came to be young Ginsberg's spiritual father and poetic master. Like Williams, Ginsberg was at first attracted to the great poets of England. But in what amounted to a 180-degree turn in his thought and practice, Ginsberg soon became one of the staunchest promoters of the American idiom and of poetry that echoed the rhythms of American speech. He saw himself as a direct descendant of the great nineteenth-century American writers Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman.

At Columbia College, Ginsberg associated with the novelist Jack Kerouac and with other young writers who would eventually constitute the literary movement known as the Beat Generation. In footloose travels "on the road" (as Kerouac's popular novel was called), Ginsberg typified the restless and alienated nature of the Beat Generation and its subculture. When, at the age of thirty, he published his long poem *Howl*, Ginsberg became one of the Beats' most famous members.

Ginsberg and other Beats eventually joined Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, and other writers with similar ideologies or techniques



Sophie Bassouls/Sygm.

and established a group known as the San Francisco Renaissance. Ginsberg's influence broadened, and his role as a kind of literary, philosophical, and political guru made him the standard-bearer of dissent in the conduct of life as well as in the practice of his art.

Open-minded and inquiring, Ginsberg explored Eastern and Western mysticism from Buddha to the English writer William Blake as part of his effort to understand the human psyche and to attain self-fulfillment. Though intensely concerned with the life of the mind, he also played influential roles in practical efforts to end American involvement in the Vietnam War, protect the natural environment, and prevent curbs on human freedom. All in all, he was a person "in the tradition of the oldtime American transcendentalist individual," as Ginsberg once classified himself.

Homework

Homage Kenneth Koch

Allen Ginsberg

If I were doing my Laundry I'd wash my dirty Iran
I'd throw in my United States, and pour on the Ivory Soap, scrub up Africa,
put all the birds and elephants back in the jungle,
I'd wash the Amazon river and clean the oily Carib & Gulf of Mexico,
Rub that smog off the North Pole, wipe up all the pipelines in Alaska,
Rub a dub dub for Rocky Flats and Los Alamos, Flush that sparkly Cesium
out of Love Canal
Rinse down the Acid Rain over the Parthenon & Sphinx, Drain the Sludge
out of the Mediterranean basin & make it azure again,
Put some blueing back into the sky over the Rhine, bleach the little Clouds
so snow return white as snow,
Cleanse the Hudson Thames & Neckar, Drain the Suds out of Lake Erie
Then I'd throw big Asia in one giant Load & wash out the blood & Agent Orange,
Dump the whole mess of Russia and China in the wringer, squeeze out the
tattletale Gray of U.S. Central American police state,
& put the planet in the drier & let it sit 20 minutes or an Aeon till it came
out clean.