

# Allen Ginsberg's Blake Vision

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**Abstract:** Allen Ginsberg famously had an auditory hallucination after reading William Blake's "Ah Sunflower," "Little Girl Lost," and "Sick Rose." He was at Columbia University when he had this "Blake Vision" in the 1940s. Around this time, he befriended William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, and Jack Kerouac and started a poetic circuit called "New Vision." Members of this group eventually contributed to the emergence of the Beat movement. The purpose of this paper is to identify the mutual influence of these writers who eventually forged a community and looked for new poetic language and expression. While Ginsberg's interaction with the San Francisco based poets was real, his attachment with Blake remained imaginary. The paper purports to show how Ginsberg appropriated the Romantic Blake as well as negotiated with an intellectual community in his pursuit of "true art." In other words, the paper revisits the theme of language, literature and community keeping Blake and Ginsberg at its focus.

On a hot summer day in 1948, the 22-year-old Allen Ginsberg experienced an "auditory hallucination." He was in his apartment in Harlem, where, by his own admission, he masturbated with Blake's book *Songs* open to the page of "Ah Sunflower." Soon afterwards, he heard Blake reading the poem to him in a "deep ancestral voice" (Ball 15). He looked out of his window, and found everything was *light*. He felt the existence of the creator outside his window and realized how his creator loved him as a son. Ginsberg noticed everywhere an "evidence of a living hand, even in the arrangement of bricks, and he was aware that each brick had been placed there by someone, that people had built the entire vast city, placing each stone and each cornice and window frame" (Miles 100). In the next few minutes, Ginsberg heard Blake reading two more poems to him: "The Sick Rose" and "The Little Girl Lost." Then on the following day when he went to Columbia bookstore, he noticed "marks of woe" in every face that he glanced upon just like Blake did in his "London" (Miles 103).

Ginsberg has talked about this "Blake Vision" in many of his interviews, classroom lectures, and almost all his biographies mention this momentous incident. Inspired by this "Blake Vision," Ginsberg wrote nine poems: "Vision 1948," "East Harlem 1948," "A Very Dove," "Do We Understand Each Other," "The Voice of Rock," "A Western Ballad," "On Reading William Blake's Sick Rose," and two untitled ones (Portugues 28). In "Vision 1948," he envisions a Faustian pact with Blake. He urges the "dread spirit" (l.1) to "dance, dance, spirit, spirit, dance" (l.14). Almost in a Shelleyan undertone, Ginsberg writes: "Hear thou my plea, at last reply/ To my impotent pen" (ll.3-4).

Instead of a lyre set to tune by the West Wind, though, we have the “spiritual scream” of the saxophone, as Ginsberg “shudder(s) with intelligence” (l.23) and “Wake(s) in the deep light” (l.24). It is quite evident from this poem that Ginsberg is dealing with a spent condition (as is suggested by the “impotent pen” image), and wants to jumpstart his career by making a pact with an earlier poem. This, for me, is an instance where literature, language and community merge. Ginsberg hinges on the past to tackle that crisis that he was going through as a young man with a schizophrenic mother, a patriarch father, heavy pressure of studies at a topmost law school – Columbia – a track record of substance abuse, and a sexual orientation not accepted by his Jewish community.

The “Blake Vision” gave him a *carpe diem* moment as he claims, “Now that I have seen this heaven on earth, I will never forget it. I will never stop considering it the center of my life, which is now changed into a new world. ... from now on, I’m chosen, blessed, sacred poet, this is my sunflower, my new mind” (Miles 103). The enthusiasm in the passage is remarkable. Ginsberg is convinced that he is blessed, and has attained the Blakean sunflower to move his life towards a new direction. Let me try to contextualize Ginsberg’s enthusiasm. Ginsberg was studying Labor Law at Columbia University, and he was expelled in his final year – officially for an anti-Semitic comment but most likely for his homosexuality. Ginsberg’s father Lois Ginsberg was a school teacher who did not approve of his son’s homosexuality either. He failed to receive sympathy from his mother Naomi who was being treated for her paranoid schizophrenia. Ginsberg became sexually attracted to Neal Cassady who came to visit Columbia to meet a mutual friend from Denver Hal Chase. Ginsberg, hoping to win the favor of Neal Cassady, who features prominently in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, went all the way to Denver, and found out that Neal Cassady already had a girlfriend. Broke, both mentally and financially, he took up a job as a ship’s crew and went to Africa. After a series of events, he returned to the US and was readmitted to Columbia upon the recommendation of his mentor Lionel Trilling. He was also shaken up by the arrest of a friend Lucien Carr for the murder of a friend over a drunken row: two of his best friends Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs were arrested as material witnesses. Incidentally, these are the poetic figures who added momentum to the Beat Movement.

Campbell in *This is the Beat Generation* mentions that it was actually Lucien Carr who introduced Ginsberg to the French poet Rimbaud. Carr was the exponent of a new vision, an idea that bridges Emersonian transcendentalism with Parisian Bohemianism. The main ideas behind Carr’s poetics were: 1) naked self-expression is the seed of creativity; 2) the artist’s consciousness is expanded by derangement of the senses; 3) art eludes conventional morality (Campbell 26).

Ginsberg at that time was writing a paper on French impressionist painter Paul Cezanne. He was particularly interested in what he calls Cezanne’s “eyeball kicking” – the way colors shift in the pulling of a venetian blind. He later used the technique in his *Howl* (Miles 97). Ginsberg by all accounts was a very sensitive young man who was very responsive to his surroundings. His Blake experience therefore made him think that he was destined to become a poet-prophet. He started reading Plato, Saint John, Plotinus and claimed that he was seeing “divine significance” in everything that he was reading. His doctor Allen Cott warned him to stop taking marijuana, his father thought Ginsberg had been afflicted with the same “fatal flaw” of schizophrenia that was taunting his mother, and his mentor Lionel Trilling that he had “finally gone over the edge” (Miles 309).

Soon after his Blake experience, he called up Trilling who simply hung up the phone. In “The Lion for Real,” Ginsberg writes:

‘It’s happened’ I panted ‘There’s a Lion in my living room’  
‘I’m afraid any discussion would have no value’ he hung up.” (ll.7-8)

It is interesting that Ginsberg alludes to the Blake vision as a lion. A tiger would have been an apt choice given Blake had a poem on that particular member of the cat family. Most likely, Lion is a pun on Lionel Trilling’s name, which, I think, goes to show that Ginsberg was looking for a master to deal with his spiritual and artistic crisis.

For the next 15 years, Ginsberg tried to recapture the Blake vision and get inspiration from it. However, in 1963, a mature Ginsberg reflected on his Blake-experience and considered it a complete waste of time. He observed:

I spent fifteen years trying to recreate the Blake experience in my head, and so wasted my time. It’s just like somebody taking acid and wanting to have a God trip and straining to see

God, and instead, naturally seeing all sorts of diabolical machines coming up around him, seeing hells instead of heavens. So I did finally conclude that the bum trip on acid as well as the bum trip on normal consciousness came from attempting to grasp, desiring a preconceived end, a preconceived universe, rather than entering a universe not conceivable, not even born, not describable. (Ball 16)

This sounds like a retraction from his previous claim of being a “chosen” poet-prophet. In fact, while lecturing in a poetry class at Kent State University in 1971, Ginsberg told his students that his Blake experience was prophetic only in the sense that it was a vehicle for his childhood daydreams:

And the voice I heard, the voice of Blake, the ancient saturnal voice, is the voice I have now. I was imagining my own body consciousness, I think - that’s what it means to me nowadays. In other words I was imagining my own potential awareness from a limited more virginal shy tender blossom of feeling. I was imagining the total power and feeling and universe possible to me. So in that sense it was prophetic, you know just like childhood daydreams are prophetic of what you grow up to be. (Ball 21-22)

The mature Ginsberg thus admits that he was pursuing a “preconceived” “daydream.” As Eric Mottram in “Anarchic Power” posits, “Ginsberg created himself as a laboratory of experience for the expanded consciousness out of an experience of poetry, religion, and drugs” (qtd. in Hyde 261). Ginsberg’s attitude towards his Blake-vision changed after his visit to India where he came across many Buddhist and Hindu mystics. Ginsberg had already tried drugs to recapture his Blake vision, and also developed suicidal tendencies in the process. In India, he shared his concerns with many spiritual leaders, including Dudjom at Kalimpong who famously advised him, “Watch the wheels within wheels, but don’t get attached to anything you see . . . If you see anything horrible, don’t cling to it. If you see anything beautiful, don’t cling to it” (Miles 309). Eventually, Ginsberg realized that he was clinging to the memory of Blake and trying to reproduce it in art. His gurus made him realize that life needed to be lived in human form. Suddenly, Blake’s “human form divine” meant “living in human form.” Ginsberg also met his Tibetan guru Chogyam Trungpa who led him to believe in the naturalness of expression. While still in India, Ginsberg heard the news of the death of William Carlos Williams who had had a definite influence on his writings. He decided to return to the US, and adopted Williams’ basic principle of “writing a poem by not writing a poem.” Upon his return, Ginsberg got involved in the anti-war demonstrations. He became conscious of his social role and spoke his conscience for the multitude. This served as an occasion to reinvent Blake, rather than cling to the memory of his Blake-vision.

The deceptive simplicity of Blake’s organized innocence attracted Ginsberg’s generation. The subtitle of Blake’s *Songs*, for example, aimed at “showing the contrary states of human souls.” But underneath such a design, Blake did the opposite. He exposed the vulnerability of western dualism. As Keith Sagar puts it, “Western culture has a tendency to make absolute judgements between the contraries. . . . If we praise spirit, it has to be at the expense of body” (Web). Blake revolted against such a design and exposed the spiritual impotency and hypocrisy of the Christian churches. In his prophetic writings, especially in *Jerusalem* (1804-20) and *Milton* (1804), Blake came up with his own mythic figures to counter Christianity. The Universal Man, who is the unified psyche of Albion, consists of the Four Zoas: Urizen, Luvah, Tharmas, and Urthona. In Blakean mythology, the balance of the Zoas is upset when Urizen (the intellectual principle) attempts, and succeeds, in usurping Urthona (the wisdom principle). As a consequence, the Zoas begin to fight amongst themselves and each tries to overrule the others and act on its own.

In the 60s, America’s rationalization of war can be interpreted in Blakean terms: Urthona (wisdom) is usurped by Urizen (reason). The use of the atom bomb, the napalm bomb, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the suffering multitude on a global scale made Blake more relevant than ever. Ginsberg’s generation in general cried out for peace and harmony. As a citizen of a country that dominated the whole world, Ginsberg’s generation felt responsible for the terror unleashed by their state. Thus, New York became Blake’s London with soldiers’ sighs and blood streams running down the palace walls. New York became the home of Moloch, the ultimate irrational cruelty. Ginsberg’s generation turned to Blake for both mystical and radical purpose. Mottram’s summary of the concern for the new poetics in the sixties that defined Ginsberg is pertinent here: “Poetry opposes the Unreal

and its manipulatory centers of power: but in the fight ‘how can the soul endure?’ – ‘what happens to real bodily feelings and the response becomes seeming unreal. Total disorganization’” (qtd. in Hyde 265). By reinventing Blake, Ginsberg became the maestro of chaos.

Ginsberg made Blake metamorphose. He was convinced that he needed to sing Blake the way the poet intended. He maintained that each syllable in a Blake poem was intentional, and therefore had to be pronounced intentionally, as it was meant by Blake. So he changed the stress order twisting the iambic pattern, and read the poems to sound like, “UnSEEN they POUR BLESSing” or “AH SUN FLOWer.” Such changes, Ginsberg told his interviewer Ed Dorn, got him out of “the hang-up of iambic stress into vowel length consciousness, which is deliberate speaking voice awareness. ... it grows out of being conscious or aware of the meaning, intention, or the significance of each syllable on the page – and recognizing that each syllable has a place” (Allen 35).

On February 18, 1969 Ginsberg gave the first public reading of Blake’s *Songs*. He treated each song individually. “The Garden of Love” was arranged as an improvised country song, “The Blossom” as a minuet and so forth. “In setting Blake’s *Songs* to music, I found a lot of mantric sounds in the poems,” Ginsberg later explained to his students. For him, the assonance in Blake’s poetry corresponded with the inhale and exhale of life-breath, which was a key feature of mantric utterances. When one opens one’s mouth to utter *Om*, for instance, one opens the gate of heaven and sends a signal to the brain and then closes the mouth to close the gate of hell. With this idea in mind, Ginsberg applied the vowel and that voice to poetry. His rendering of Blake’s “A Dream” thus ended with repeated choruses of Hum Hum Hum Home/Home home home hum. He thus added the sacred syllable to complete his Blake.

Ginsberg was looking for a universe-rhythm, a culture language that could express the utopian vision of a peaceful world. Singing Blake in a universal tune Ginsberg liberated him from the spatial and temporal bondage. (This is not at all out of place given the fact that Blake too believed that “All religions are One”). By the same token, in Ginsberg, Blake took an American accent, finding himself in the grand tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman among others. Clearly, Ginsberg had taken his artistic liberty to play on with his Blake. What started as a vision became transformed into a voice. So if the initial Blake experience was like the child on the cloud in Blake’s introduction to *Innocence*, the second Blake was the cherub sitting on the piper’s shoulder in the Blakean illustration of *Experience*. It soon turned out that Ginsberg was in a contest with his own Blake. It became, to borrow the title of one of his better known poems, a “Contest of Bards”: “Young poet had dreamed old poet’s scene & its hidden secret, and Eternal Rune cut in stone at the hearth-front hidden under porphyry bard-throne. Young bard tries to seduce old Boner with his energy & insight, & makes him crawl down on the floor to read the secret riddle rhyme” (296).

While talking to Steve Silberman, Ginsberg described the poem as “a traditional contest of bards, the old bard, and the young poet who’s come to displace him and push him off the cliff.” It seems in “Contest of Bards” Ginsberg has finally become ready to push the Old Blake from the cliff, but embrace him in his consciousness. He has finally learned to go beyond his “Blake Vision” and found a language to access a community to form a literature of their own.

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This paper is part of a research on contemporary British poetry. Some parts were published earlier in the author’s *The Figure of the Shaman in Contemporary British Poetry* (Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2013).

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