

The Ginsberg Century: Everything Zen

Beat

John Lardas

**DELIBERATE PROSE:
SELECTED ESSAYS, 1952-1995**

Allen Ginsberg
Edited by Bill Morgan

HarperCollins
528 pages; cloth, \$30.00

**POEMS FOR THE NATION: A COLLECTION OF
CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL POEMS**

Edited by Allen Ginsberg with Andy Clausen
and Eliot Katz

Seven Stories Press
140 Watts Street, New York, NY 10013
72 pages; paper, \$5.95

There have been few poets who have achieved the degree of public celebrity of Allen Ginsberg. Author of “Howl,” “Kaddish,” and “Wichita Vortex Sutra”; poet laureate of the Beat Generation; psychedelic proselytizer; ashram chanter; May King; moral voice of 60s radicalism and 70s anti-nuclear pacifism; professor and mentor; practitioner of orgiastic incantations, home-grown Transcendentalism, and Zen Judaism—Ginsberg was, throughout his life, an irrepressible social force and flamboyant bugbear to comfortable, whitewashed notions of the American dream. Given this excess of identity, how do we get a handle on the real Allen Ginsberg, his life and his legacy, the frail piece of human flesh that has now become a relic of rebellion for the faithful and iconoclasts alike? *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952-1995* broaches this question at every turn, providing insight into what lay below, above, and behind Ginsberg’s poems, great and small. Read with an eye towards correlating text with context, this collection of meditations, literary

manifestos, blurbs, obituaries, liner notes, political salvos, and press releases does not disappoint.

Edited by Bill Morgan, *Deliberate Prose* supplements Ginsberg’s collected poems, lectures, and interviews with a more restrained side of the bard’s personality. Organized thematically, these pieces (many of them previously unpublished) show Ginsberg at his contemplative best—sustained musings on domestic and international politics, drugs, spirituality, censorship and sex laws, literary technique, as well as reminiscences of self and others ranging from Walt Whitman to Robert Frank. The eclecticism is appropriate. So, too, is the total absence of chronological order. Jumping decades at the turn of a page makes for a collage-like reading experience and turns a rather conventional format into a thematic palimpsest of Ginsberg’s American Century. Even for those who believe Ginsberg’s career to have been a sort of freewheelin’ Dada production, these pieces are both script and stage directions distilled into prose form. They allow us to stand back and pan out over Ginsberg’s career, seeing in it a narrative structure not always evident in the verbal particulars.



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Despite Ginsberg’s association with first thoughts and bop prosodies and the fact that he once defined an “essay” as anything not composed

on the tongue, he was a poet of extreme discipline and *deliberation*. As evidenced in the previously unpublished “Fourteen Steps for Revising Poetry,” Ginsberg was always the craftsman, writing and rewriting, excising, dividing, and substituting after the moment of inspiration:

3. Review it through several people’s eyes
4. Review it with eye to idiomatic speech
5. Review it with eye to the condensation of syntax (blue pencil and transpose)....

And so on. Given Ginsberg’s knack for self-promotion, it is often forgotten that “Howl” was sculpted over a three-year period; “Kaddish” reworked in order to expunge “abstract bathos” after the initial 40-hour marathon writing session.

Due, in part, to the rigors of his craft, Ginsberg believed himself to be a religious poet—from his Blake vision in 1948 through his death in 1997—a point given much lip but very little service by his critics. Take for instance some remarks made in 1987 on poetry as a spiritual discipline:

It’s an old tradition in the West among great poets that poetry is rarely thought of as “just poetry.” Real poetry practitioners are practitioners of mind awareness, or practitioners of reality, expressed in their fascination with a phenomenal universe and trying to penetrate to the heart of it. Poetics isn’t mere picturesque dilettantism or egotistical expressionism for craven motives grasping for sensation and flattery. Classic poetry is a “process,” or experiment—a probe into the nature of reality and the nature of the mind.

What Ginsberg said of poetry can also be said of his own life outside the poems. For what is so striking about all of the pieces in *Deliberate Prose* is how weighted they are with religious concern, how suffused they are with the desire to mine the staid surface of things.

While Ginsberg’s religious ethic evolved over time as an accumulation of metaphysical idioms—from the early influences of Oswald Spengler, Wilhelm Reich, and Lester Young among others to Tibetan Buddhism and the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa—it remained grounded in the sphere of the everyday. For example, when looking back on Andy Warhol’s oeuvre in 1989, Ginsberg wrote of “an almost spiritual nonattachment, or appearance of nonattachment, since ultimately Warhol’s private mortal reference was to the supreme *kitsch* of the Catholic Church.” When praising William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg made no distinction between this world and the next. “He was somebody no different from ourselves,” wrote Ginsberg,

actually, somebody you don’t have to worry about pulling a fast metaphysical trick on you and declaring another universe. That’s the whole point; dealing with *this* universe. And that was a fantastic discovery: that you can actually make poetry by dealing with this universe instead of creating another one.

Like Williams before him, Ginsberg viewed the material world as an expression of an invisible reality, always already present. While Ginsberg did his share of navel-gazing, his was a mysticism of social conscience. Simply put, his strategy was to bring metaphysics to bear on the whole of social and political life.

In the much-anthologized “Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs” (1959), Ginsberg asked, “When will we discover an America that will not deny its own God?” He continued to pose this rhetorical question in various forms and with varying degrees of specificity throughout his entire career. Whether speaking *out* in defense of Lenny Bruce or Timothy Leary or *against* the war in Vietnam or CIA and FBI programs of domestic surveillance, or *for* the legalization of LSD before the US Senate, Ginsberg’s politics were always affirmations of a world elsewhere, of an America that had yet to live up to its full potential. It was through the jeremiadic form that Ginsberg strove to make the world transcend itself, to force it out of its own skin in order to walk a mile in the poet’s shoes. Indeed, one of the last roles assumed by Ginsberg was editor of *Poems for the Nation: A Collection of Contemporary Political*

Poems. In this little volume, Ginsberg gathered together poets who shared his zeal in effecting change through an appeal to our still undiminished resources. Contributors include William Burroughs, Anne Waldman, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Peter Lamborn Wilson, and Eileen Myles. *Poems for the Nation* is a testament to the nebulous force that is Allen Ginsberg, a “great American” in the words of Ed Sanders, who “made it his business/ to know the intricacies of his nation/ more than any other/ bard in our history.”

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Both *Poems for the Nation* and *Deliberate Prose* remind us of the extent to which Ginsberg’s ideas and personality have framed the ways in which we view the world and live within it. In the end, the real Allen Ginsberg is an attitude—skeptical yet hopeful, wrathful yet always willing to “hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won’t let us sleep.” While other artists may have leveled more exacting critiques upon the evils of society, Ginsberg may have been the only one who could call technology or institutionalized religion “boring” and remain both effective and poignant. Ginsberg’s work still pushes us to account for the symbolic dimensions of our own experiences, to qualify them in terms of the culture that surrounds us in order to cut through “the smog of Blakean satanic war mills and noise of electric sighs and spears which is twentieth century mass communication.” For only through the interrogation of the aesthetic dimension of our experiences can we ever come to terms with the imagination *inside*.

This last point was made yet again during MTV’s New Year’s Eve broadcast when Ginsberg suddenly appeared—a spectral participant in the Times Square festivities approximately 46 years after he had walked these same streets “looking for an angry fix.” As Bush, the pop-grunge export from Britain, sped through another forgettable song from inside the secured walls of the MTV studio, lead singer, Gavin Rossdale, broke into the opening lines from “Howl.” It was a curious moment, depressing in its reduction of Ginsberg’s élan to the round-the-clock spectacle of modern teenage angst; hopeful in the sense that the bespectacled homosexual Jewish poet had entered so completely into our consciousness that no one *seemed* to notice anymore, neither Rossdale nor MTV host, Carson Daly, nor even the studio audience.

Turning the TV off, I was reminded of Ginsberg’s 1958 poem, “The Lion for Real.” Its epigraph still speaking, still implicating: “*Soyez muette pour moi, Idole contemplative....*”

John Lardas is the author of The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, forthcoming from University of Illinois Press.