

Portrait of a Beat

Socially,

Allen Ginsberg manages to shock or astound most of the people he meets.

Culturally, he either has them guessing or eating out of his hand.

Any way you

look at him the

Prophet of the Beats

is a pretty far-out cat.

Article by Alfred G. Aronowitz



In Chicago once, a woman asked Allen Ginsberg: "Why is it that you have so much homosexuality in your poetry?"

"I sleep," he has since said, "with men and with women. I am neither queer nor not queer, nor am I bisexual. My name is Allen Ginsberg and I sleep with whoever I want."

Obviously, Mr. Ginsberg also says what he wants. But then it is as the most outspoken of the Beat Generation poets that he has become the most spoken about. In the salons of literary respectability the

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name Ginsberg today is on more lips than care to pronounce it, even with a sneer. Nevertheless, Ginsberg, although he may believe, as do so many of his Beat colleagues, that life is an illusion, has no illusions about life, and especially about sex life. He lives it, as he presumes to do everything else, in the best of poetic traditions, if not the best of social ones.

"I don't know whether it's a great sociological problem or not," he says, "but I think that it's pretty shameful that in this culture people have to be so frightened of their own normal sex lives and frightened of other people knowing about it to the point where they have to go slinking around making ridiculous tragedies of their lives. So it seems, for one thing, at this point, that it's necessary for the poets to speak out directly about intimate matters, if they come into the poetry, which they do in mine, and not attempt to hide them or evade the issues. Life is full of strange experiences."

Certainly Ginsberg's has been.

He has handled luggage in the baggage room at Greyhound, carrying suitcases as heavy as his thoughts. He has written speeches for a candidate for Congress. He has taken off his clothes at somewhat genteel parties, proclaiming that those who objected to his body were really ashamed of their own. He has run copy for the Associated Press. He has shipped out as a seaman on tramp steamers, sailing to places as remote as some people find his verse. He has been a Young Liberal, running a mimeograph machine in a labor union organizing office but now he considers labor unions cut from the same stencil as managements. He has washed dishes in greasy spoon restaurants, which, by the way, are his usual eating places. He has harbored thieves and helped them store their loot, justifying himself with the thought that Dostoevsky would have smiled upon him. He has hitchhiked over most of the country. He has undergone eight months of treatment in an insane asylum, suspecting all the while that it was everyone else who was insane. He has taken heroin, cocaine, and what has been called "the true morphine," and he says he's never had a Habit. And, between New York and San Francisco, among young American poets who once didn't know that one another existed, he has organized what the literary crust seems to think is a literary underground.

If Jack Kerouac is, as he has been called, the St. Jack of the Beat Generation, then Allen Ginsberg is its Prophet.

His first published contribution to the growing library of Beat books was a poem which he calls *Howl* and which others with what may be less foresight call blasphemous.

"*Howl* is written," says Ginsberg, peering as he does through his glasses with a friendly intermingling of smile and solemnity, "in some of the rhythm of Hebraic liturgy — chants as they were set down by the Old Testament prophets. That's what it's supposed to represent — prophets howling in the Wilderness. That, in fact, is what the whole Beat Generation is, if it's anything — prophets howling in the Wilderness against a crazy

civilization. It was Jack Kerouac, you know, who gave the poem its name. I mailed him a copy just after I wrote it—it was still untitled—and he wrote back, ‘I got your howl . . . ’”

The critics got *Howl*, too, or at least they received it. “Nothing goes to show how square the squares are so much as the *favorable* reviews they’ve given it,” groaned poetic colleague Kenneth Rexroth, who himself called *Howl* “much more than the most sensational book of poetry of 1957.” Almost overnight, *Howl* became the Manifesto of the Beat Generation. And if that wasn’t enough to insure Ginsberg’s rise, or plummet, to fame, depending upon whether one looks up toward him or down, the San Francisco Department of Police gave him the final shove. It tried to ban the book.

“Allen seems to think he is a latter-day Ezra Pound,” says Norman Podhoretz, who has been the most critical of the critics, although he wasn’t quite square enough to give *Howl* a favorable review. “In Ginsberg’s letters I see the epistolary style of Pound, who, you know, was always writing letters to editors, letters full of profanity, encouraging them to publish his boys. Pound was the great literary talent scout of his day—he discovered T. S. Eliot and helped Yeats become a great poet. He acted not only as leading poet and leading brain but also pushed all the other poets . . . Now Allen is doing the same thing . . .”

Ginsberg, of course, takes Pound with a grain of salt and Podhoretz with a pound. Although Ginsberg considers the Beat movement to be heir poetic to the movement which Pound once led, Ginsberg rejects Pound much the same as Pound eventually rejected his former colleagues. And as for Podhoretz, Ginsberg has commented: “He is totally and technically incompetent.” For his part, Podhoretz is not so sweeping in his opinion of Ginsberg. A freshman at Columbia College when Ginsberg was an upper-classman there, Podhoretz, writing in a constant complaint that his is a generation without a literary voice, refuses to accept the Beat Generation even as a falsetto. Insisting that there isn’t enough vitality in other American writing and that there is too much violence in the Beat, he has, consequently, become as much a villain to the Beats as he considers them to literature. There have, however, been attempts at reconciliation.

“I was working at home one Saturday night,” Podhoretz recalls, “when I got a telephone call from some kid — it must have been Ginsberg’s friend, Peter Orlovsky. He said, ‘Allen and Jack are here having a ball. Why don’t you come down and have some kicks.’ I told him no, I was busy, and he said, ‘Wait, Allen’ll talk to you.’ So Ginsberg came to the phone—I knew him at Columbia but I hadn’t talked to him in years—and he started talking in bop language. So I told him to come off it and he said, ‘Come on down, we’re having a party. We’ll teach you the Dharma.’ Well, I guess I was crazy. I went. But it turned out not to be a party at all. There was just Ginsberg, Orlovsky and Kerouac at the apartment of one of Kerouac’s girl friends. Kerouac

asked me, 'Why is it that all the biggest young critics . . . Why are you against us? Why aren't you for the best talent in your generation?' I said I didn't think he was the best talent in my generation . . . Kerouac was indignant and said that I said he wasn't intelligent. He really didn't argue, he kept making cracks and being charming, and he *is* charming. But I think much more highly of Ginsberg's literary abilities than Kerouac's. I've always thought highly of Ginsberg as a poet, you know. This Beat stuff is a fairly recent kick of his. He may still become a great poet. He may write important poetry some day. Ginsberg has a superb ear—he can do most anything he wants to do with verse. As an undergraduate in college he was writing fantastic things."

Although the meeting was not quite a meeting of minds, there is evidence that some of their opinions have since mellowed. In any event, the parallel Podhoretz has drawn between Ginsberg and Pound is almost letter-perfect. From his soap box-furnished tenement flat in the cheap-rent district of New York's Lower East Side, Ginsberg's outgoing mail is exceeded only by his incoming mail, which, daily, brings him new correspondents to answer. Among the regular correspondents, there is, for example, William Seward Burroughs, author of *The Naked Lunch*, writing from a flea hotel in Paris or from Tangiers, telling about the shortcomings of French mysticism, reporting on incidents and sights that could be seen only by an eye as naked as his own, letters that will make another novel, "endless," as Ginsberg says of *The Naked Lunch*, and "that will drive everybody mad." Another is Gregory Corso, sending letters from France or Italy or Crete or Greece, where "I shall surely sleep a night in the Parthenon," telling of a vision of skinless air, questioning death and denouncing its fear, writing a poem about it and enclosing the manuscript. Another is Robert Creeley, a modern jazz poet, editor of *The Black Mountain Review*, not Beat himself, perhaps, but with a beat, writing from Majorica or the Grand Canyon, enclosing poems, too, that fascinate and delight Ginsberg and he sends his own in answer. Another is poet Gary Snyder, his missives inked with a calligraphy that once marked other illuminated manuscripts, a penmanship borrowed from the monks of Middle Aged monasteries, writing now from San Francisco, now from Japan, with an ancient alphabet that speaks a whole new hip language. And there is Lawrence Ferlinghetti, owner of the San Francisco book store called City Lights, a beacon for the Beats and other poets, publisher of *Howl*, a poet like the rest, exchanging manuscripts and compliments, sometimes urgently, by telegram: ALLEN: I READ 'APOLLINAIRE'S TOMB' STRUCK DUMB & POOR. YOU ARE HUGEST DARK GENIUS VOICE STILL UNRECOGNIZED.

"Allen is always sending me copies of poems written by his friends, and he's always scrawling notes on the margins," says Ferlinghetti. "He always writes, 'You must publish this—this is mad, this is wild!'"

In addition to his vast correspondence

with the various agents of his Underground at their various outposts on The Road, Ginsberg receives a daily deluge of unsolicited letters, some from publications asking for articles or looking for arguments, some from publishers seeking publication rights for an aroused and enthusiastic overseas audience, and many from colleges and universities asking Ginsberg to give poetry readings, a task Ginsberg has been happy to perform for nothing, even happier to perform for money, but lately is just as happy not to perform at all—he doesn't do it any more.

Ginsberg, of course, had become a literary figure even before he wrote *Howl*. Certainly his name, or at least suitable aliases thereof, had already been imprinted in a large, although largely unpublished, body of literature. By 1957, when *Howl* came off the presses, he was a major, if not heroic, character in most of Kerouac's books and also had put in an appearance as David Stofsky, the so-called mad poet, in John Clellon Holmes' *Go*. But all this, naturally, was of little satisfaction to Ginsberg, who had insisted on following his own angel and whose ambitions were written in his own manuscripts.

"I can be pretty persuasive," Ginsberg has said on occasion, and the fact of the matter is that he can. A deft and positive logician, even though he believes in intuition over rationality, Ginsberg is at his best in conversation, and he has changed many minds by the sheer power of his own, so much so that critics who started out doubting Ginsberg's idea of his destiny are now beginning to doubt their own ideas of it.

Culturally, he has charmed Chicago, captured San Francisco and corrupted Los Angeles. "In California," he recalls with a gentle glee, "in L. A., we went down for a poetry reading among what was a bunch of, basically, social Philistines. We came down, offered ourselves, free, to read poetry for them — we were going to Mexico to meet Jack. They were a rather unruly audience, but they were all right, there were some interesting people there. But there was one creepy red-haired guy who kept on saying, 'What are you guys trying to prove?' And I said, 'Nakedness' — he was interrupting the poetry. So he said, 'Nakedness? What do you mean by nakedness?' So I suddenly understood that I had to show him what I meant in some way that would really get across and a way that would move him. So I pulled my clothes off, which shut him up."

Ginsberg concedes that his poetry readings in Chicago were a bit more dignified. Certainly they were accepted with more dignity. Sponsoring one reading was the Chicago Shaw Society, to whom Ginsberg announced, ". . . *this poetry is droppings of the mind . . .*" and whose members, according to the Shaw Society bulletin, responded by dropping the preconceptions from *their* minds. In fact, the only real heckler at the Chicago readings apparently was *Time Magazine* (February 9, 1959): ". . . In the richly appointed Lake Shore Drive apartment of Chicago financier Albert Newman, the guests chatted animatedly, gazed at the original Picasso

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on the wall, and the Monet, the Jackson Pollock . . . At length Poet Ginsberg arrived, wearing blue jeans and a checked black-and-red lumberjack shirt with black patches at the elbows. With him were two other shabbily dressed Beatniks. One was Ginsberg's intimate friend, a mental-hospital attendant named Peter Orlovsky, twenty-five, who writes poetry (*I talk to the fire hydrant, asking: 'Do you have bigger tears than I do?'*); the other was Gregory Corso, twenty-eight, a shabby, dark little man who boasts that he has never combed his hair—and never gets an argument."

According to Ginsberg, there is much that *Time* hasn't said, either about the Chicago readings or about all the other occasions when *Time* has turned on the Beats. "Knowing what I do about the way they've exaggerated and distorted actual events which concern me," he says, "I shudder to think of what they've done to international events, news that's really important. Think of how many people read *Time* every week and get their picture of the world from it." The result has been something of a feud. "*Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?*" Ginsberg asks in a poem. "*I'm obsessed by Time Magazine. I read it every week. Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore.*" Once a *Life Magazine* reporter assaulted Ginsberg's flat seeking an interview, and Ginsberg threw him out, although not bodily.

"He tried to tell me why I should talk to him even though the article was going to be unfriendly," Ginsberg says. "Why should I talk to him?"

The flat in which Ginsberg is not at home to *Life* reporters is of the type that might be expected to house a poet who has taken a vow of poverty the better to be untrammelled by modern society, a vow which modern society—the economics of poetry publishing being what they are—has helped him keep. Two stories above a Puerto Rican storefront church, it lies behind a large, enchanted door that most of the time is locked and unresponding but sometimes answers with a "Who is it?" A few steps past the bathroom, with its eternal light, because someone has to climb on the rim of the tub to turn it off, and there is the kitchen, light green or light blue behind the wall soot on which someone has finger painted, with convincing expertness, a mystical Chinese or Japanese legend that has no explanation. Over the refrigerator, sketched on brown wrapping paper, is Kerouac's drawing of Dr. Sax just as it appears on the title page of his book, *Dr. Sax*. On a ledge over the brown metal table, usually cluttered with slightly used dishes, glasses, cups, sugar, salt and an extensively used typewriter, a tiny souvenir bust of Napoleon faces the wall, his back toward everyone. A few inches away on the same ledge, another souvenir, a post card with a picture of the house in Rome where Shelley once lived. And on the wall in the corner is the photograph of another hero, William Carlos Williams, silhouetted atop Garrett Mountain overlooking his city, once Ginsberg's, Paterson.

Ginsberg and Orlovsky share the apart-

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ment with Corso, when he is in New York, and with a continuum of visitors, many uninvited or unannounced. There is no telephone to announce their coming. At the kitchen table there may be novelist Paul Bowles for dinner, a friend from Tangiers, or Jack Kerouac, arrived for the weekend, or Philip Whalen and Michael McClure, San Francisco poets, houseguests, or Fernando Arrabal, French novelist, paying a social call, or friends and literati.

In the largest of the three bedrooms, with its balcony, a fire escape, there is television, a second-hand set worth its weight in mahogany, offering treasures such as Popeye, The Three Stooges, and occasional Marx Brothers films, comedies of a life that is frightening to live, scripts whose writers of old Hollywood probably never even realized were copied from Kafka. In Ginsberg's flat on quiet evenings at home sometimes all the occupants are on separate typewriters in separate rooms listening to separate voices, working late into the night, sleeping late into the day, with Ginsberg, his digestive tract as sensitive as all of him, awakening sometimes ill, the after-effect of hostile audiences, perhaps, or of cough-syrup euphoria or perhaps of simple poetic brooding. Once a bum from the nearby Bowery knocked on the door, came in and told of hearing that Ginsberg was really a secret philanthropist, a benefactor of mankind. Ginsberg gave him his total assets, a dollar and change.

"People used to ask me if Allen wrote poetry, too," recalls Ginsberg's father, Louis Ginsberg, an English teacher in Paterson and a poet as well. "And I would tell them, 'No—he's the only one in the family who's normal.' Then I found out he had all these poems hidden in his room at Columbia.

"As a father, I'm happy that Allen has made his success in poetry, and I certainly like some of his poems very much," the elder Ginsberg says. "My poetry is a little different but I guess each one has his inner nature that he has to satisfy."

Allen Ginsberg was born June 3, 1926. While he was a boy growing up in Paterson, his mother was in and out of mental hospitals. She died in Pilgrim State Hospital in 1955. Ginsberg has written several poems for his mother, including, curiously enough, *Howl* — curiously, because its full title is *Howl for Carl Solomon*.

"I realized after I wrote it that it was addressed to her," he says, sitting on the bed with two cats playing at his feet and a parakeet in a cage intruding an occasional raucous reminder of its existence. "I realized that *Howl* is actually to her rather than to Carl in a sense. Because the emotion that comes from it is built on my mother, not on anything as superficial as a later acquaintance, such as Carl."

Ginsberg was with Solomon at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Born in 1928, Solomon, according to other bits of biography, was proclaimed a child prodigy at the age of seven, when several New York newspapers commemorated, with headlined awe, his ability to memorize the batting averages of all the players in

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the National and American leagues. Educated in New York and at the Sorbonne, and later an editor with a New York publishing house, he, like Ginsberg, spent time in the Merchant Marine as well as in the asylum.



A 1945 image of Ginsberg during his days in the Merchant Marines

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