

Chapter 6

“A Revival of Poetry as *Song*” Allen Ginsberg, Rock-and-Roll, and the Return to the Bardic Tradition

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Resistance to Allen Ginsberg has a long history. His provocative style shocked the country, challenged the ethics of the Cold War consensus, and spurned a long and ugly battle over censorship in the courts of San Francisco. However, Ginsberg's connection to the pulse of mid- to late twentieth century culture cannot be denied, and his presence as a vital, poetic link between the work of several early major poets and the music of the psychedelic scene cannot be overlooked. He was the self-proclaimed and quite serious poetic disciple of William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Ezra Pound, and he felt that these poets called for and inspired a return to a mystical, bardic tradition of poetry. He recognized an answer to that call in the work of many of the big names in music, including Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and the Beatles, and considered these figures' combination of instruments, rhythm, and thoughtful lyrics to be a more full-bodied poetic form. As a study of the shifts in Allen Ginsberg's work (including *Howl for Carl Solomon* (1956), *The Fall of America: Poems of These States* (1972) *First Blues: Rags, Ballads, and Harmonium Songs* (1975), and various selections from his later works) will support, Ginsberg became increasingly influenced by the style of his rock-and-roll counterparts and strove to become a part of the bardic movement that they reinvigorated.

Ginsberg worked tirelessly and meticulously to compose *Howl*, the famous lamentation for “the best minds” of a generation and his first major poem (*Howl* line 1). He became inspired to write the poem in October of 1954, as he looked out of his New York apartment to the city below. Staring across at the buildings, he was seized by the notion that “he saw the lights of those buildings transform into the face of an evil monster,” and that “Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows” became the driving image of the poem (Morgan 184). He began writing *Howl* that very night and would devote “all-day-long attention” to it for over a year (Carter 184; interview with Fortunato, et al. 245). He finished the first and last sections by August of 1955, but his journals from the rest of that year and into 1956 reveal the large extent to which he was still absorbed with finishing the rest of the work (*AG Trust*). When Ginsberg wrote *Howl*, he was acting more as a poet, in the traditional, formalist vein, than he ever would again. In the writing of that controversial piece, Ginsberg spent hours hunched over a typewriter, belaboring over form and meter and fighting to master the words on the page. In other words, he was a poet who was honoring the time-honored tradition of other poets.

Both the content of *Howl* and Ginsberg's journal entries from the mid-1950s show his active engagement with the work of several major poets during the time that *Howl* was written. William Blake was one of these poets, and in fact, Ginsberg owed *Howl*'s very existence to him. In 1948, Ginsberg experienced an auditory hallucination as he read Blake's "Ah Sun-flower!." He believed that he heard the voice of the poet reading the poem. When Ginsberg's mind wandered to another of Blake's poems, "The Sick Rose," he felt the sensation that "the entire universe was revealed to him," and Ginsberg "spent a week after this living on the edge of a cliff in eternity" (Morgan 103; *The Book of Martyrdom* 266). Ginsberg's mention of "radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy" in *Howl* is a reference to his Blake experience (*Howl* 12-13). Although this incident was a definitive moment in Ginsberg's life, and one which he would repeatedly seek to recapture through the aid of drugs and mysticism, he was initially frightened by it. Naomi Ginsberg, Allen's mother, had recently been committed to Pilgrim State Hospital in New Jersey on grounds of insanity, and his fear that the hallucination was symptomatic of an inheritance of her mental illness prompted him to admit himself to the Columbia Psychiatric Institute, where he met Carl Solomon, the man to whom he referred in the extended title of *Howl*, on the first day of his stay (Carter xv).

However, it is Walt Whitman, more than any other, upon whom Ginsberg called as a muse. Ginsberg had adored Whitman's work since the age of fifteen, and by the time he began working on *Howl*, he believed Whitman was the greatest poet in American history (*AG Trust*; Morgan 210). As his reading lists from his 1955 and 1956 journals demonstrate, Ginsberg was reading Whitman hungrily while he was writing *Howl* (*Journals* 215; 233; 294). At the time, he was "getting interested in free verse and long-line poetry," forms which he utilized in *Howl*, and he looked to Whitman for guidance in these efforts (167). Ginsberg explained that he "began ransacking all the literature I could find to correlate with that, including reading Whitman from beginning to end" (167). In his diaries, Ginsberg recorded several dreams about Whitman, and there is even an entire entry dedicated to exploring "the guarded look in Whitman's eyes – as in the Brady photo" (273). In short, Ginsberg was completely consumed with Whitman during the period of *Howl*'s creation.

Howl's epigraph is drawn from Whitman's "Song of Myself," and, in many ways, the poem acts as an artistic tribute to its predecessor. Like Whitman, Ginsberg utilizes lists and free verse, and *Howl* has the same visual look on the page as "Song of Myself." Furthermore, Ginsberg identified with Whitman as a homosexual, and though Ginsberg's images are much more explicit than Whitman's subtle and often ambiguous ones, there is a common thread. Ginsberg seems to have adopted even the persona of the poet of "Song of Myself." When an interviewer later asked him how he felt when he was writing *Howl*, Ginsberg replied that he had "a sense of being self-prophetic master of the universe" – quite the Whitmanesque sentiment indeed (interview with Clark 53). However, as Ginsberg lays out one jarring image after another, it becomes obvious that *Howl* is also a conscious contradiction to the celebratory tone of "Song of Myself." Whereas Whitman embraces the musicality of language, Ginsberg acts in a willful struggle against it. Ginsberg delivers sordid, and often obscene, depictions of those, among others, "who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism"

and those “who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of coldwater flats” (*Howl* 31; 4). He draws on discordance to underscore the criticisms he delivers of America because, after all, his poem is not a song of himself but a howl for “the best minds” of his generation (*Howl* 1). Nevertheless, Ginsberg’s contemporaries recognized the Whitmanesque quality of his *Howl*. When Lawrence Ferlinghetti heard about Ginsberg’s reading of *Howl* at Six Gallery in San Francisco, he wrote him to say, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career” – a direct echo of Emerson’s words to young Whitman (*AG Trust*).

Ezra Pound was another significant source of inspiration for Ginsberg in the long months he spent composing *Howl*. Ginsberg’s extensive readings lists from this period show that he was pouring rapidly through not only Blake and Whitman but also Pound. In 1954 and 1955, Ginsberg read the *Cantos* and other Pound works repeatedly and studied Pound’s poetic method very carefully (*Journals* 28; 55; 213-14). A journal entry dated May 29, 1954, shows that Ginsberg copied down Pound’s “The Red Wheel Barrow” and took note of all of its nuances, especially Pound’s use of structure, space, and the positioning of images. When asked about the line in *Howl* which begins, “who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed...,” Ginsberg named “Pound’s discovery and interpretation of Chinese” as his inspiration (*Howl* 74; interview with Fortunato, et al. 249). When Ginsberg began work on *Howl*, he had already attempted, without success, to meet his literary idol three times. Nevertheless, in a 1956 journal entry, Ginsberg related that he “woke up chilled by my scholastic inadequacy and looked at Pound’s collected *Literary Essays*” (*Journals* 231). Although Pound had refused to meet him in person, it was still Pound to whom Ginsberg turned for solace and wisdom in times of artistic self-doubt.

T.S. Eliot’s presence, and particularly that of *Four Quartets*, is also felt in *Howl*. Ginsberg was devouring Eliot’s work as well in the mid-1950s. In his journals, Ginsberg recorded dreams about Eliot and careful studies of his poetry. The fact that *Four Quartets* was one of the first works to which Ginsberg turned in the effort to recreate the Blake experience reveals his opinion of the power of the work, and its influence on Ginsberg translated to *Howl*. Ginsberg employs Eliot’s objective correlative in images such as that of the “tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology,” and he takes up Eliot’s struggle to redeem time through his depiction of the individuals “who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time” (*Howl* 50; 54). These four poets – Blake, Whitman, Pound, and Eliot - served as Ginsberg’s main sources of inspiration during the writing of *Howl*, and as he read through their poems, studied their work, and even dreamed about them, he thought of himself as actively engaging with them through his own poem.

Although Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl* with these more traditional poets in mind, he craved creative collaboration with his peers, and he found it at the 1955 Six Gallery reading. At this historic meeting, several Beat poets gathered together to share their work, and Ginsberg, for one, “was determined that this should not be the typical, dry, staid, academic affair that poetry readings had tended to be” (Morgan 208). He was anxious about the meeting at Six Gallery; the occasion marked only Ginsberg’s second

experience with a reading and the first time that *Howl* would be presented to the public. However, the crowd's reaction was overwhelming, and Ginsberg was ecstatic (209). He found that he gained confidence in a situation which could only be compared to "a kind of cross-fertilization, as when jazz musicians are suddenly turned on by each other and perform at the top of their form" (210). Ginsberg felt that the raucous collaboration of the Beats was similar to that of musicians, and he thrived on it. The other poets and the audience responded to it too, and word about the Six Gallery reading spread quickly. In response to the great demand for a repeat performance, the events were recreated a few months later at the Berkeley Town Hall (215). Ginsberg's "new friends in San Francisco were hot, blazing with enthusiasm and ideas," and their influence led Ginsberg to challenge his beliefs about poetry (210). He formed a distaste for the belabored, stringent forms of the establishment and "began to view poets who wrote in traditional forms as nothing more than trained dogs" (210). With his fellow Beat poets, Ginsberg formed a connection of mutual support that he could never have had with his former literary heroes, and he came more and more to look to his peers for inspiration.

However, it was Bob Dylan who would fundamentally alter Ginsberg's already shifting definition of poetry. He met Dylan in 1964 at his own party, where Dylan was the guest of a friend. When the subject turned to poetry, Ginsberg was pleased to hear Dylan's compliments of Jack Kerouac, and the two became "fast friends" (Morgan 383). He already enjoyed Dylan's music and was especially impressed by his lyrics. In fact, Ginsberg felt that Dylan's "Masters of War" was "almost a cowboy version of Blake" and confessed that he cried the first time that he heard it (382). Although, at this point, Ginsberg mentally separated the station of the musician from the post of the poet, "the line between poetry and music was fading," and he claimed that Bob Dylan was "as good as a poet" (Morgan 394). The warm feelings were mutual, and Dylan's 1965 *Bringing It All Back Home* album is a testament to their burgeoning friendship. A picture of Ginsberg was featured in the liner notes, along with a comment from Dylan expressing his dismay over the fact that "Allen Ginsberg was not chosen to read poetry at the inauguration" (Hishmeh 397). Ginsberg's association with Dylan led to his interest in other musicians, and soon "his consciousness was being consumed by the Beatles" (Morgan 395). In fact, he approached Dylan's and the Beatles' music with the same enthusiasm he once brought to volumes of Blake and Whitman. In 1965, Dylan introduced Ginsberg to the Beatles, and once again, friendships were established almost immediately (409). Ginsberg "felt that the music was a breakthrough that was destined to change society once and for all," and soon, he would connect it to his work as a poet (394).

Allen Ginsberg was enamored of the musical counterculture. On one level, he coveted the attention, fame, and glamorous lifestyles that his musician friends enjoyed. In the mid-1960s, when he first began attending parties and concerts, he "was envious as he watched Dylan and the Beatles hailed by a new generation" (Morgan 410). However, as his exposure to the musical scene grew, he began to realize that the musicians were doing much more than winning fans and fame. They were revolutionizing poetry.

Ginsberg felt that, somewhere along the way, poetry had lost the key components of its original nature. In his view, each stage in the evolution of the form marked an increase in its degradation. When poetry was tied to dance and the natural rhythm of the body, it was at its zenith. It lost the important physical aspect when it was reduced to music and shed the critical musical aspect when it was relegated to the spoken word. Finally, poetry was condensed to its weakest, most “disembodied” form – words on the printed page (interview with Aldrich, et al. 157-58).

In the late 1960s, Ginsberg developed a theory that the movement towards reviving that vital bardic tradition had begun with his earliest poetic idols and would extend past his contemporary musical champions. His definition of poetry shifted again, and he now came to think of it as “what has been lost and what can be found” (interview with Carroll 173). Ginsberg was always careful not to place Ezra Pound above Walt Whitman and proclaimed him “the greatest poet of the age! Greatest poet of the age...certainly the greatest poet since Walt Whitman” (interview with Durham 347). However, he believed that Pound had made the first step in recovering poetry’s former glory by bringing the form back to the spoken word and further described him as “the first poet to open up fresh new forms in America after Whitman” (347). He basically modeled his theory of the evolution of poetry on “Pound’s famous scheme...where he saw the trouble with poetry is that it departs from song, and the trouble with song is that it departed from dance” (interview with Aldrich, et al. 157). Because he believed that Pound was “the one poet who heard speech as spoken from the actual body and began to measure it to lines that could be chanted rhythmically without violating human common sense,” he named him as the poet responsible for giving voice back to the words on the page (Durham 347).

Furthermore, Ginsberg felt that the Beat poets, including him, had responded to Pound’s influence and had ushered in the next important change in poetry. He explained that “the next step after Pound modeling words from actual speech...is to bring it to chant – chanting is the next step – which is what we did” (interview with Aldrich, et al. 158). He argued that, although their work was largely excluded from the academy at the time, they were “carrying on a tradition, rather than being rebels” (interview with Le Pellec 302). Whereas “the academic people were ignoring Williams and ignoring Pound...and most of the other major rough writers of the Whitmanic, open form tradition,” the Beats “had that historical continuity” that connected them to both past and future (302). According to Ginsberg’s developing theory, it was the Beat poets, not the mainstream writers, who had recognized Ezra Pound’s call, and their work served as a link in the intergenerational effort to reclaim the bardic tradition of poetry.

Ginsberg argued that, in turn, members of the musical counterculture, and especially Bob Dylan, had initiated the next step of setting poetry to song. He felt that Dylan built upon the chanted verses of the Beats and that he had been “influenced by the whole wave of poetry that went before and...got to thinking of himself as a poet, except a singing poet” (interview with Aldrich, et al. 157). When he met Dylan in 1964, Ginsberg perceived that “a torch had been passed,” and he celebrated this “revival of poetry as *song*” as both a crucial step in the history of poetry and a way of connecting his new

friends to his old muses (157). He very clearly tied the two as being parts of the same, large movement to take poetry “beyond the printed page” (157). He even spoke of the musical counterculture in terms of his earliest poetic influences by pointing to their “messages about tolerance, *transcendancy*, and ecstasy” and by stressing the “*Whitmanic* adhesiveness from generation to generation” (emphasis mine; interview with Elliot 69; interview with Le Pellec 302).

Of course, Ginsberg recognized that there were further steps to be taken. The full realization of the bardic tradition would require the reunion of verse, rhythm, and dance, and he saw as much in “[Mick] Jagger and the others,” with their “shamanistic dance-chant-body rhythm ‘I wanna go hooome, no satisfaction!’” (interview with Aldrich et al. 158). Once again, Ginsberg related this type of fully “embodied” poetry back to the initial efforts of earlier poets and explained that “what’s happening with rock and roll, with all the body thing which is being laid on...is actually a return to the cycle, following Pound’s critical analysis, in a way” (158). Ginsberg claimed that this chain of influence would continue, until “ultimately what you can expect is a naked, prophetic kid getting up, on a stage, chanting, in a trance state, language, and dancing his prophecies” (158). Thus, according to Ginsberg’s theory, the collected efforts of Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, the Beat poets, Bob Dylan, and other members of the music industry would fully re-embodify poetry and produce a “return to the *original religious shamanistic prophetic priestly Bardic magic!*” (158).

As Ginsberg became more immersed in the late 1960s’ psychedelic scene, he spent considerable thought on working out this new theory of poetry. The connection it posited between his literary heroes, his Beat peers, and his rock and roll sidekicks excited him. He explored all of the implications of such a large movement of poetry and worked to bridge the connections between his literary ancestors and his musical peers. When he was finally allowed to meet Ezra Pound in 1967, Ginsberg was eager to discuss music, and he came ready with the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album and Bob Dylan’s *Blonde on Blonde* in hand (Morgan 444). When he related this experience later in life, he commented that Pound “sat through about two hours of Dylan and the Beatles, so he heard that at least. That was nice. Patient man” (interview with Durham 350). Although Pound was virtually mute throughout the entirety of their meeting, Ginsberg did not take his silence as a show of disapproval of the music, for as Olga Rudge said, “if he didn’t like it, he would have gotten up and left the room” (350). Similarly, in his first conversation with the Beatles, Ginsberg turned the conversation towards poetry, sat down in John Lennon’s lap, and asked if he had ever read William Blake (Morgan 409-10). It was as if Ginsberg wanted Pound and the Beatles to see the same connection that he saw. He hoped that Pound, the initiating link in the recovery of poetry, could hear in the Beatles’ music what his work had inspired. In turn, Ginsberg wished that the Beatles, a key component of the next phase of poetry, would recognize their artistic lineage in Blake’s work. Ginsberg strove to involve even his deceased literary heroes in his excitement over his new theory. He detected an early impulse towards the bardic movement in Blake’s work and, claiming that it was the poet’s original intention, sought to “re-embodify” Blake’s poems. In 1968, he began his effort to set Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* to music. Blake had written music to

accompany the poems and had sung them for his friends. However, he had not recorded his musical notations, so Ginsberg composed “contemporary scores” of his own and released them as an album in 1970 (Morgan 457; *AG Trust*). Soon, Ginsberg’s interest in the connection between poetry and music would be reflected in his own work as well.

Ginsberg soon grew weary of representing the outmoded link in the bardic chain. Although he felt that the Beats had served a vital role in the bardic revival, the torch had been handed off to the musicians, and his 1972 *The Fall of America: Poems of These States* is the product of one of Ginsberg’s earliest efforts to align his work with this next generation of poetry. In the effort to “re-embodiment” his poetry, Ginsberg chose not to compose his works on the page but to return to an oral tradition, and he received Bob Dylan’s help in this aim. In 1965, in the effort to encourage his friend’s natural talent at impromptu poetry, Dylan gave Ginsberg six-hundred dollars to buy a Uher tape recorder. The recorder was “a state-of-the-art machine for 1965” and could operate on battery power for up to ten hours (Morgan 418). Uher recorder in hand, Ginsberg hopped in a Volkswagen Microbus and set on a tour of America, “noting whatever struck him, from newspaper headlines to bits of conversation to billboards to music and news he heard on the radio” (Carter 54). Ginsberg was inspired to compose by the things he saw and the people he met, and “the tape recorder gave him a whole new approach to composition, making it much easier to sketch words and phrases and sounds wherever he was” (Morgan 420). No longer chained by a typewriter to the desk in his apartment, Ginsberg could speak oral poetry into his recorder as he experienced war-time America, in all its turmoil, firsthand. In 1966, he began translating the recorded tapes into the manuscript that would become *The Fall of America* (*AG Trust*).

The most famous, and perhaps most moving, poem in *The Fall of America* is undoubtedly *September on Jessore Road*. Ginsberg was inspired by a 1971 trip to Calcutta to write the poem. In September of that year, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones funded Ginsberg’s trip with the hopes that he “could report on the terrible tragedy of the millions of people fleeing from the civil war in Bangladesh” (Morgan 480). When he arrived in Calcutta, Ginsberg witnessed the deplorable conditions of the people there. Hundreds of sick, hungry individuals were crowded together in “makeshift tents” and “cardboard houses” with no sanitation or protection from the elements, and Ginsberg found the sight of them “heartbreaking” (480). Moved by the experience, Ginsberg sought to give voice to those individuals he saw in Calcutta with *September on Jessore Road*. He hoped to reach a wide American audience with the poem and to expose the hypocrisy of a country that would fund a war in Vietnam but leave countless individuals around the world to die of the lack of basic necessities.

With *September on Jessore Road*, Ginsberg delivers essentially the same critique of modern America that he does in *Howl*. As he traveled and composed spontaneous poetry with his recorder, Ginsberg hoped to be able “to update and rethink Whitman’s celebration of America” (Carter 54). Just as he had with *Howl*, Ginsberg found that he took a much grimmer view of his country. In *September on Jessore Road*, Ginsberg gives a picture of utter despair and destitution. He writes of individuals of all ages with nothing but pain, mud, death, and sadness. Babies are shown with “Bellies swollen,”

children are “weeping in pain,” parents are “dying for bread,” and the elderly are “silently mad” (*September* 2; 104; 9; 12). Ginsberg pleads with Americans to realize that, although the scene he depicts exists for them only “on planet TV,” it is all too real for many (130). While Americans worry over problems that do not even exist, such as what to “buy with our Food Stamps on Mars,” people in other parts of the world are dying needlessly (120). Furthermore, in Ginsberg’s opinion, it is not only the American people who are at fault. Although the American government celebrates its humanity, Ginsberg claims that the country chooses to squander its riches on meaningless wars rather than invest the resources to rebuild human life. Thus, when the people of Calcutta cry, “Where is America’s Air Force of Light?,” Ginsberg can only reply sadly, “Bombing North Laos all day and all night” (87-88).

Although the subject of *September on Jessore Road* is similar to that of *Howl*, the poetic inspiration behind it signals Ginsberg’s shifting allegiance to the musical counterculture. In writing *September on Jessore Road*, he cast aside aspirations to imitate his former muses, such as Whitman and Blake, in the hope of being able “to offer Dylan a text equal to his own genius and sympathy,” and Dylan’s influence is strongly felt in the poem (*First Blues* iii). In *September on Jessore Road*, Ginsberg traded the sprawling, Whitmanesque style of *Howl* for rhymed couplets, lilting stanzas, and organized meter. Previous poets had utilized the same elements in their poetry, of course, but Ginsberg made it clear that he was using the forms of the musician, not the poet; in the conclusion of the book, he explains that he intended the poem to be “a mantric lamentation rhymed for vocal chant to western chords F minor B flat E flat E minor,” and in the preface of *First Blues*, he indicates that *September on Jessore Road* was written as a “blues” (*The Fall* 190; *First Blues* iii). Furthermore, Ginsberg referred to specific points in the work, not as lines in a poem, but as “lyrics” in a song (Carter 396). In the conclusion of the poem (or song), he asks repeated questions, such as “How many families hollow eyed lost?,” “How many loves who never get bread?,” and “How many sisters skulls on the ground?,” and his repeated answer is a resounding “Millions” (137; 139; 141). The structure is meant to emphasize the destitution of the people of Calcutta, but the question and answer style is more than a little reminiscent of Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” a song Ginsberg admittedly admired and claimed “could have been any little boy’s lyric fancy” (interview with Carroll 174). Although both *Howl* and *September on Jessore Road* lament the superficiality and ignorance of American life, Ginsberg’s poetic muses had definitely changed in the fifteen years since he wrote his first masterpiece.

Ginsberg dedicated *The Fall of America* “to Whitman Good Grey Poet,” but it is clearly the influence of his musical peers that permeates the book. Bob Dylan equipped him with the technology he needed to be able to compose spontaneous, oral poetry on the road, Keith Richards funded the trip which culminated in the birth of *September on Jessore Road*, and John Lennon provided him with the artistic support and reinforcement that he craved. When Ginsberg was writing *Howl*, he turned primarily to Pound for help; he repeatedly tried to meet him, and when he awoke “chilled” by his perceived lack of talent, he turned to Pound’s works for help (*Journals* 231). However, in 1971, when Ginsberg returned from Calcutta, it was John Lennon, not Ezra Pound, with whom he

wished to meet, and he immediately set out for Lennon and Yoko Ono's apartment in Syracuse. He read *September on Jessore Road* to Lennon and felt that the work had succeeded when it "brought tears to the musician's eyes" (Morgan 481). By the early 1970s, Ginsberg clearly looked to his musical counterparts, not his poetic predecessors or peers, for help, inspiration, and guidance.

The Fall of America was not Ginsberg's only project in the early 1970s, for he was working simultaneously on *First Blues*; in this work, Ginsberg reached beyond the oral poetry of *The Fall of America* to the next step in his self-devised hierarchy of poetic effort – the setting of poetry to song. With *First Blues*, Ginsberg adopted the artistic process of the musician. In 1971, he held a reading at New York University, during which he created impromptu poetry onstage. Unbeknownst to him, Bob Dylan was concealed in the crowd and was amazed by the performance. He called Ginsberg later that night and showed up at his apartment. Eager to make an impact upon Dylan, Ginsberg "tongued syllables and sentences" as quickly and skillfully as he could, while Dylan accompanied him on his guitar (*First Blues* iii). He was successful in impressing Dylan, and the informal jam session spurred a series of formal sessions together in the recording studio. Ginsberg created poetry "out of whole cloth in the studio, right on the spot," while musicians played instruments, ran over the music, and recorded (interview with Schumacher 437; *First Blues* iii). At last, Ginsberg had truly found the collaborative atmosphere that he had glimpsed for a moment at the Six Gallery reading.

Although the songs were in fact translated to the page for the 1975 edition of *First Blues*, Ginsberg was careful to preserve their original musical nature, even in print. The titles of the poems reveal their musicality; twelve of the thirty-two pieces included in *First Blues* are described as rags or blues, and the titles of several others, such as "Slack Key Guitar" and "Everybody Sing," are musical as well. For fourteen of the songs, he included the sheet music, carefully written out in his own hand. Ginsberg was also careful to emphasize the songs' spontaneous, mutable nature. In order to reveal "how raw mind actually sings," Ginsberg chose not to revise the songs for the print version of *First Blues* but rather to leave them just as they were in the studio, and "Put Down Yr Cigarette Rag" ends with the direction to "improvise further" (*First Blues* v; "Put Down Yr Cigarette" 49). Although the reader of *First Blues* cannot comprehend the work's full musical effect, the print version does retain vestiges of its original form.

Unsurprisingly, the content of *First Blues* reflects Ginsberg's continued adoration of Bob Dylan. The book is dedicated "To Minstrel Guruji Bob Dylan" and includes a tribute to the singer, entitled "On Reading Dylan's Writing." In this song, Ginsberg casts Dylan as a prophet-poet with a "heavenly soul" in which "God himself" has "entered" (19-20). He praises Dylan's unmatched talent and claims that "the dross of wisdom" has left him "lone on earth" (15-16). With the lines, "I've broke my long line down/ to write a song your way," Ginsberg acknowledges that he has emulated Dylan's music, but he is quick to remind him that the "Sincerest form of flattery/ is imitation they say" (7-8; 5-6). At the same time that Ginsberg was appropriating Dylan's musical style, however, he was becoming more convinced of the literary value of Dylan's work. When he was asked to speak about Dylan in a 1976 interview, Ginsberg replied that he was "a great poet,"

dropping the quantifying phrase “as good as” that he had attached to a nearly identical compliment in 1964 (interview with Chowka 391; Morgan 394). The title page of *First Blues* features a black and white photograph of Ginsberg and Dylan sitting Indian-style by the grave of Jack Kerouac, a poignant picture that casts Dylan as a member of the grieving literary community, and nowhere in “On Reading Dylan’s Writings” does he refer to Dylan as a musician. In fact, the title implies that the author of the poem is not listening to the songs of a musician but in fact reading the words of a writer. Thus, in the print edition of *First Blues*, Ginsberg blends the divisions between poetry and music by not only acting the part of a musician himself but also by casting Bob Dylan as a fellow poet.

In writing *The Fall of America* and especially *First Blues*, Ginsberg traded the toil of the poet – the work with pen or keyboard to bring the words on a page into submission – for the creative process of the musician. However, it is important to note that, for their first incarnations, Ginsberg reduced his creations into the form with which he was most familiar, and which was undoubtedly expected of him – lines of poetry on a page. The oral poetry on his tape recorder was later written down as *The Fall of America*, and although the spontaneous music of the studio was later released in Ginsberg’s 1983 double album *First Blues*, the songs were originally translated to the page and published in a print version. In the early 1970s, Ginsberg was more clearly aligned with his idea of the bardic movement than he had been twenty years before, but he had not yet shed the very restriction he had named as the binding force of the modern poet – the printed page.

From the mid-1970s to the end of Ginsberg’s life, his poems drew so close to musical numbers that they shed any semblance of classical poetic structure that would chain them to the page at all, and Ginsberg adopted a musician’s life, complete with busy tour schedules, collaboration with other musicians, and popular albums. In 1975, Bob Dylan called Ginsberg in the middle of the night, asked him to sing his latest work over the phone to him, and invited him to be a part of his Rolling Thunder Revue tour. There were more than seventy artists, including Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell, involved with the tour, and Ginsberg later described the group as “a traveling rock-family commune” (interview with Chowka 392). However, he emphasized his idea that the musicians recognized their art as poetry and related that they were all “calling each other ‘poet’” (392). He perceived the frequent request of “sing me a song, poet” to be a “good sign” of the health of the bardic movement (392).

Ginsberg’s other musically-inclined ventures were numerous. In 1986, he recorded with the Hobo Blues Band, and in 1988, he worked with Philip Glass to produce *The Wichita Vortex Sutra*, an opera which premiered at the Schubert Theater in New York (*AG Trust*). In 1993, Bono, the lead singer of U2, asked Ginsberg to perform “Hum Bom!” and “Put Down Yr Cigarette Rag” for a television special that was to be aired in both Europe and the United States (Morgan 627). In 1994, Ginsberg released *Holy Soul Jelly Roll*, the much anticipated four-disc collection of “poems and songs” from the entirety of his career (*AG Trust*).

In 1996, Ginsberg earned what has come to be seen as the pinnacle of success in the musical community – a popular MTV video, and one featuring a rock icon no less. In 1995, Ginsberg traveled to London to perform at Albert Hall. Before the show, he visited Paul McCartney at his home and asked him if he could recommend a musician to accompany him for the night. McCartney volunteered himself, and Ginsberg’s audience was stunned when McCartney appeared on stage with Ginsberg to perform “The Ballad of the Skeletons.” The event was filmed and released on MTV, where it “received significant air time” (Morgan 640-43). By the mid-1990s, Ginsberg had finally achieved his goal of connecting poetry to music.

In many ways, Ginsberg’s own assessment of his career and his critical reception do not match up. Overall, Ginsberg was unhappy with *Howl*. In his 1956 journal, he wrote that he was displeased with “the disorganization of it,” and when he received the first copy of *Howl and Other Poems* by mail, he was “ashamed it was so shoddy” (*Journals* 271; 304). Even after the support of his friends at the Six Gallery reading and their kind testaments at the censorship trial, “he wasn’t sure *Howl* was any good,” and the only praise of it that he could muster was the dubious compliment that it “almost convinces” (Morgan 252; *Journals* 304). When Fantasy Records offered him a contract to record *Howl* in 1957, he vehemently rejected it. In fact, he used obscenities to describe the poem and claimed to be “positive” that it “was written two years ago in limbo by somebody else, not me” (Morgan 253). In Ginsberg’s mind, poetry could always be improved by being set to music, and in 1994, he debuted his musical version of *Howl* with the Kronos Quartet in Carnegie Hall (*AG Trust*). *Howl* was not the only poem that he sought to redeem, and in 1983, he followed John Lennon’s earlier suggestion to set *September on Jessore Road* to song (Morgan 560). The poem was “gracefully set to music for a string quartet,” and Ginsberg performed it in 1986 when he received the Golden Wreath lifetime achievement award in Yugoslavia (593). By setting the poem to music, Ginsberg felt that he had restored *September on Jessore Road* to, and even surpassed, its original, spoken form. He also sought to improve upon that other project from the early 1970s, *First Blues*, and in 1983, he produced the album version of the work. Although the critical reception of the album was negative, Ginsberg “had never been so happy with a project. He loved everything about the album” (565). In July of 1976, Ginsberg wrote the poem he would name as his best. In that month, Ginsberg’s poet father, Louis Ginsberg, passed away, and Allen penned “Father Death Blues” on the plane ride home for the funeral (*AG Trust*). The poem was properly named as a blues, for it was essentially a song, and one which Ginsberg sang at every opportunity. The poet’s own feelings about his work speak volumes. Although most readers and scholars point to *Howl* or *The Fall of America* as his best works, Ginsberg was unhappy with both until he set them to music. He was exceedingly pleased with his album version of *First Blues*, a project which failed according to public opinion, and he named “Father Death Blues,” a song which most people have never heard of and which received only four mentions in all seven-hundred and two pages of Bill Morgan’s distinguished 2006 biography of the poet. The reason behind this seeming discrepancy is clear: Ginsberg favored those pieces which came closest to realizing his bardic vision.

Until his death in 1997, Ginsberg continued to reiterate his belief that the way back to true poetry is through music. In 1982, he responded to an interviewer's snide observation that "this great poet who's written classical stuff like *Howl* is now dabbling with rock 'n' roll, New Wave, and blues," with the response that "poetry and music have always been allied" (interview with Schumacher 442). Ginsberg went on to say that, although he was "a little late in practicing that," he was trying, through his musical endeavors, "to sharpen my practice and get back to home base" (442). He further argued that the musicality which he had introduced into his work was not a symptom of the degradation of his poetry but rather a sign of artistic maturity and "refinement" (442). Through both his work and his influence, he continued to try to convince poets and musicians of their inherent connectedness. When he met them in 1965, Ginsberg tried to educate the Beatles about William Blake. In 1996, he was still aiming to show at least one of them his artistic heritage, for he was working with Paul McCartney on haikus (interview with Silberman 548). He continued to argue for his theory of the return to the bardic tradition and the importance of the artists who represented each link. In a 1989 interview, he echoed the theory he had first put forth in the 1960s and explained that "poetry's extended itself in its own lineage afterward into John Lennon, the Beatles,...and Dylan...and I think after the wave of Whitman and then maybe another wave of Pound, it's...the strongest wave of American influence on world literature – the combination" (interview with Jarab 505). For Ginsberg, that combination of the two forces was always the key.

One cannot judge the accuracy of either Ginsberg's vision of the chain of influence in poetry or his theory of the correct path back to the bardic tradition. Furthermore, Ginsberg's success as a poet (or a musician, for that matter) is, of course, open to debate. All that is clear is that Ginsberg believed strongly in his theories himself, and as he changed from the figure bent over the typewriter, hoping to hear William Blake's voice again, to the figure onstage with the microphone in hand and the band behind, he undoubtedly felt that he had finally lived up to that self-description he had penned in his journal so many years before – "Allen Ginsberg Bard out of New Jersey" (*Journals* 168).

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