

Tripping on the Threshold of the Doors:

The Difficult Negotiation of the Visionary in Ginsberg's Drug Poems

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Ginsberg's lifelong interest in psychedelics and other psychoactive substances is notorious. Not only did he often compose verse under their influence, he also wrote several poems *about* them – and he did so with a rather precise idea in mind, as I will argue in this paper. The poems which I refer to as the 'drug poems' are those in which Ginsberg consumes a hallucinogen and attempts to render an immediate poetical account of this experience: among them, 'Laughing Gas', 'Mescaline' and 'Lysergic Acid', all written in the late 1950s and published in the aftermath of 'Howl'. Each of these poems seeks to represent an event which is unique; a one-of-a-kind encounter between a particular drug and a perceptive consciousness at a specific instant and in a specific context – a combination of multiple factors which will inevitably alter the outcome of the drug experience as well as the trajectory of the poem.

Nevertheless, it is possible to detect a series of common features that link these three poems: each of them, in its own way, relates Ginsberg's first-hand experience with a hallucinogen, which is ingested or inhaled with the deliberate intent to record the minute details of his altered consciousness, in the name of poetry, we could say. Ginsberg's experiments with hallucinogens surely bear some relevance in terms of self-discovery: they

pertain to the inner travel – a travel opening inwards and enabling insights into the psycho-geography of the self; something that Timothy Leary had started to map out from Harvard around the same period.

Beyond self-discovery, these drug experiences provided Ginsberg with substantial material of a poetical nature whose potential on an aesthetic plane was tremendous – an axis at the centre of my investigation. By interfering with the creative process, psychoactive drugs – and hallucinogens in particular – unlock myriad *new* synaptic connections that may open new routes of thought and systems of representation, thereby potentially expounding artistic possibilities. This positions Ginsberg on the frontline of post-war experimentalism; paralleling the practice of the European avant-gardes, from Symbolism to Surrealism and other *-isms*, which also had recourse to a chemical armada of various psychoactive products for artistic purposes.¹

More particularly, the hallucinogenic experience that informs these poems can be conceived as a literary strategy that seeks to interrelate the object of the poem with its subject – a writing subject under the influence of the object and in whom the boundary between volition and subjection is blurred: a strategy that aims to capture, and expose, the psychological, ontological and emotional flow of the innermost self through the promise of *new* poetical combinations. Here the private event is made public: introspection meets revelation, a prominent feature in Ginsberg's poetry.

But there is more to it: Ginsberg is not just writing on hallucinogens and tripping for the sake of art; rather, he is – in his own words – ‘trying to superimpose the acid vision on the

¹ The relations of the various 20th-century avant-gardes to psychoactive products has been extensively researched by Marcus Boon in *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

old memory of a cosmic-consciousness',² that is, seeking to re-capture in poetical form the insight of the universal mind via the effects of the drug – a poetical project which bears a truly *spiritual* significance. Such a context radically redefines the roles: the function of the drug is not just recreative; it is regarded, first and foremost, as an entheogen – its primary purpose is to catalyse a spiritual experience in the subject, an experience which will initiate a form of transcendence.

Therefore drug-tripping (and especially tripping on hallucinogens) becomes the search for a poetical method: a means to shortcut mechanical consciousness (that of the rational and the profane); a tool for disrupting habitual brain connections – or, as Blake would have it, for 'cleansing the doors of perception' – in order to reach, and embody, a *visionary* type of consciousness. This is a form of consciousness which is able to apprehend insights of a spiritual nature, including revelations, illuminations and epiphanies of all sorts; or, in the Beat lingo, *visions*.

And in fact, hallucinogens, by their very properties, pertain to the nature of the visionary process itself. What is the biological definition of a vision? And how does it compare with a hallucinated one? When Ginsberg had his auditory vision in the summer of 1948 – did he *hear* the voice of Blake, or did he *hallucinate* it? In fact, aren't we talking about the same thing? This we don't really know; but what we do know, is that, just like Blake before him, or St Teresa, the imprint that this voice – real or hallucinated – left in the mind, its traces and the *mystical* resonance of these traces, constituted a deflagration big enough to transform the subject's life. This, as many critics and biographers have shown,³ is what Ginsberg was interested in at the beginning of his career: reproducing, or rather producing again, the type of visionary episodes that occurred to him for the first time in 1948;

² Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1978), p.121.

³ Such as Barry Miles, Bill Morgan as well as Gordon Ball through his interviews with Ginsberg.

this time with the aid of hallucinogens and with a white page by his side, with the clear intention to capture these whimsical visions in written form.

Capturing and transcribing these visions on the page – for self-discovery and to illuminate the reader too! As Ginsberg told Gordon Ball in 1970:

The function of Blake art or Blake's art, is to catalyse that experience in other people. In other words I'm interpreting the 'aesthetic experience', as they used to say in the 1890s, as none other than the good old psychedelic flash. Or vice-versa – the language is interchangeable. What people now experience as a psychedelic universal cosmic consciousness, to the extent that it is describable as such, is probably what Yeats was talkin' about [...] in 'Gratitude to the Unknown Instructors'.⁴

Blake, yes, but also Yeats. A lineage appears here, emerging from Romanticism and expanding towards the mystical and the occult; a lineage embracing several traditions which all challenge the epistemological framework of positivism and rationality, just as it expresses the transcendental in various forms.

The point of Ginsberg's 'drug poems', therefore, is not only to generate, and perceive, drug-induced visions – but also to *pass them on* to the reader; and sharing not just the vision, but the *whole visionary state* via the poem; that is, communicating an ontology of transcendence. As Ginsberg confirmed: 'That's the way I began to see poetry as the communication of the particular experience – not just any experience but *this* experience'.⁵

Following on from the Whitman tradition, Ginsberg improvises himself as a Prophetic poet, a

⁴ Gordon Ball (ed.), *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p.18.

⁵ Ginsberg, 'A Blake Experience' [1966], in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp.120-30 (p.126).

‘bard’, whose voice, as Tony Trigilio argues, is meant to ‘transform observation into vision [by] blurring the boundaries between prophet and God’.⁶ This voice, which Ginsberg referred to as ‘the voice out of the burning bush’ – an allusion to Blake’s painting ‘Moses and the Burning Bush’ (1803) – is a voice through which the poet becomes a spiritual and transcendental relay, something at the core of the American Romantic tradition.⁷ According to Emerson: ‘Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words’.⁸ Later in the same essay: ‘[...] by God, it is in me, and must go forth of me’.⁹ For Emerson as well as for the early Ginsberg, the mission of the poet is to embody, and convey, this vision. According to Richard Gray, ‘this experience implicates [Ginsberg] in what he has called the “messianic thing”’: the sense, inherited from Whitman, that he is a “chosen, blessed, sacred poet” whose vocation is to prophecy to America’.¹⁰ This is what situates Ginsberg’s ‘drug poems’ in the tradition of the Prophetic: their ultimate aim is to initiate a series of drug-assisted visions of a spiritual nature and convey these visions – along with the ontological states attached to them – to the audience or the reader via the medium of the poem.

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The transmission of the visionary, which is something both spiritual and ontological, requires a certain poetics – a poetics that would support and allow a reification of the vision

⁶ Tony Trigilio, *Strange Prophecies Anew: Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), p.15.

⁷ ‘The only poetic tradition is the voice out of the burning bush. The rest is trash, and will be consumed’ (Ginsberg, ‘When the Mode of the Music Changes, the Walls of the City Shake’ [1961], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp.247-54 (pp.248-49)).

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The Poet’ [1844], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp.259-84 (p.263).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.274.

¹⁰ Richard Gray, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman, 1990), pp.300-01.

in the here-and-now. This poetics, as Paul Portugés has shown, relies on a set of strategies of embodiment and performativity, as implemented in ‘Howl’ for instance – a poem in which Ginsberg has recourse to breath patterns in an attempt to accommodate the visionary by embodying it within the rhythm of the poem itself.¹¹ The idea is that each and every reader, at any time, in any place and in any context, would have a chance to tap in to Ginsberg’s visionary consciousness and re-enact the visionary moment by reciting its lines, by *breathing* the poem in and out we might say. This poetic strategy, which is highly conceptual and also rather idealistic, relies on a natural chemical interaction between oxygen input and brain response.

This is how the poem becomes performative: it seeks to catalyse a certain state of mind, a certain mode of consciousness by transferring a specific way of being, which is achieved by the reader for him or herself upon the act of reading. Through this technique, the content of the poem – the *vision* – gets actualised: breath, as Gray points out, is used as a means to ‘liberate[s] the self from the mind and place[s] it firmly in physical movement, [...] it does not seek to describe but *to enact*’.¹²

This sense of performativity, which is transcendental in essence, is enhanced by the spontaneous quality of the writing. For Ginsberg as for many Beat writers (Kerouac, Snyder and others), true knowledge is, first and foremost, intuitive – a belief shared with many Romantic poets and, of course, with Emerson. Emerson conceived of spirit as encapsulated within the intuition, itself an ontological function of each and every individual. For Emerson as well as for Ginsberg, intuitive action is primarily an act of immanent creation that exemplifies the spiritual principle of the universal mind. Therefore, a spiritual and visionary type of consciousness may materialise on the page through a highly spontaneous outflow, an

¹¹ See Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (1978).

¹² Gray, p.281.

interplay of free-association of words, images and sounds – an outflow achieved through a form of ‘intuitive’ writing: a type of writing envisaged as perfectly adequate for the occurrence of the visionary.

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In the ‘drug poems’ however, the acquisition of a visionary type of consciousness – and *a fortiori* its communication to the reader – turns out to be hugely problematic. The writing flow, meant to record the drug experience and convey potential visions, is undermined by a simultaneous scanning of the self; a constant reflexivity which is fundamentally threatening and which tends to shortcut the formulation of intuition in both self and poem – a pre-condition for the emergence of visionary states.

In ‘Lysergic Acid’, Ginsberg glimpses at a ‘million eyed monster’ that acts like a ‘ghost Trap’:¹³

It is a multiple million eyed monster
 it is hidden in all its elephants and selves
 it hummeth in the electric typewriter
 it is electricity connected to itself, if it hath wires
 it is a vast Spiderweb
 and I am on the last millionth infinite tentacle of the spiderweb,
 a worrier
 lost, separated, a worm, a thought, a self¹⁴

¹³ ‘Lysergic Acid’, p.109.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.107.

This monster, devised as malevolent and echoing Moloch in 'Howl', engulfs Ginsberg in feelings of powerlessness and decay. A product of the imagination under the influence of the hallucinogen, this monster materialises a threat that shrouds the poet and thwarts his vision; simultaneously, it propagates obsessive feelings that lock the look inwards and unsettle the flow of his tripping consciousness:

My face in the mirror, thin hair, blood congested in streaks
down beneath my eyes, cocksucker, a decay, a talking
lust
a snaeap, a snarl, a tic of consciousness in infinity
a creep in the eyes of all Universes
trying to escape my Being, unable to pass on to the Eye ¹⁵

This reflexivity engenders a self-consciousness that reoccurs throughout the poem and redirects the narrative object. The corollary of this self-consciousness in the poem is a voice, obscure and crippled, an inner voice made incarnate that reveals the poet's awareness of his own decay – a *consciousness of death* in writing form that antagonises Ginsberg's notion of a 'cosmic' consciousness, and which is catalysed by the monster that Ginsberg envisions in the opening of the poem. In this sense, the monster may be viewed as the reflection of the poet's own craving for cosmic redemption; a longing for visions of a transcendental nature, constantly frustrated, and which becomes threatening for the subject's own integrity – a Romantic trope frequently used by John Keats (1795-1821) in his poems.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., p.108.

¹⁶ Franca Bellarsi, 'From Literal to Textual Migration and Nomadism: Romantic Nature and Allen Ginsberg's Ecopoetics', presentation at the 8th Annual Conference of the EBSN, 12 October 2019, Nicosia, Cyprus.

This ambivalence – a yearning for transcendental union so intense that it paradoxically menaces the unity and the stability of the self – is even more palpable in the poem ‘Mescaline’. See the opening:

Rotting Ginsberg, I stared in the mirror naked today
 I noticed the old skull, I’m getting balder
 my pate gleams in the kitchen light under thin hair
 like the skull of some monk in old catacombs
 [...] so there is death ¹⁷

Later:

What happens when the death gong hits rotting Ginsberg on
 the head
 what universe do I enter
 death death death death death the cat’s at rest ¹⁸

This tragic voice, which superimposes with that in ‘Lysergic Acid’, in turn becomes crippling and incapacitating: it gets stuck and repeats itself in several places. Such iterations operate as a hammer fragmenting the harmony of the long line – used by Ginsberg as a central poetical device which upholds the presentation of the visionary as breath goes freely, unconstrained. In ‘Mescaline’, the lines become messy, short and chaotic, with no space for

¹⁷ ‘Mescaline’, p.104

¹⁸ Ibid.

spiritual élan. They express not so much the desire to decondition the mind but rather indicate a dead-end, a snarl of consciousness turning back on itself:

I want to know

I want I want ridiculous to know to know WHAT rotting ginsberg ¹⁹

Here is self-consciousness at full speed, penetrating every line of the poem and atomising its flow. As Ginsberg analysed retrospectively, ‘this creates anxiety, the desire to make it be a heavenly god experience’.²⁰ Anxiety, or rather *anguish* – which, for Jean-Paul Sartre, is precisely ‘my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of *not-being* it’, which can be interpreted as the threat of non-being.²¹ This anguish – a function of the ‘reflective apprehension of the self’ – acts as a menace to the creative impulse: it expresses itself in the poem to the detriment of a more varied, fluid and intuitive expression of the experience.²²

It is this emotional state of anguish which is further explored in the longer poem ‘Laughing Gas’, where the senses of the poet gradually blank out. This obliteration of the senses triggers the dissolution of the here-and-now, a voiding of the real tainted with Buddhistic undertones:

Relax and die –

The process will repeat itself

Be born! Be born!

Back to the same old smiling

¹⁹ Ibid., p.105.

²⁰ Portugés, p.124.

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943], trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, rev. by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre. Oxon: Routledge Classics, repr. 2007, p.56.

²² Ibid., p.54.

dentist –

[...]

The fire engines screaming

toward an old lady's

burned-in-her-bedroom

today apocalypse

tomorrow

Mickey Mouse cartoons–

I'm disgusted! It's Unbelievable!

What a funny horrible

dirty joke! ²³

While these interplays between form and formlessness – but also between the comic and the tragic – give an impression of transience, they also build a solid feeling of emptiness into the poem; they denote the poet's struggle to cohere with his environment, but also to channel his imagination. Cluttered with meta-commentaries, such lines make it impossible for the reader to *re-enact* the experience; an experience which can only be described, indirectly, through a reflexive agency. According to Ginsberg, commenting upon 'Laughing Gas':

The whole point was that the total enlargement of consciousness is *oblivion!* [...]

Actually, it's a blanking out of the senses, rather than an enlargement of the senses

because, one by one, the senses go out under laughing gas. It gives the appearance of

²³ 'Laughing Gas', p.92.

enlarging perception to a point where the totality of the universe invades the individual entity and dissolves the individual entity into the blackness of space.²⁴

This voice, too, can be related to that in 'Lysergic Acid' and 'Mescaline': self-directed and highly perceptive but strictly descriptive, it turns the vision back onto itself and ends up alienating the poet; breeding a state of consciousness that feeds on its own fear of non-being, each time regressing further into nothingness.

The experience is fearful, the tone deleterious: we are far from the celebratory 'Howl', a poem whose footnote finishes on the magnanimous 'Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul !'²⁵ Instead, in 'Mescaline':

No Glory for man! No Glory for man! No glory for me!

No me!

No point writing when the spirit doth not lead ²⁶

In fact, what leads the poem is Ginsberg's will to objectify his own consciousness against the hallucinogen, instead of tripping along with it. Consequently, and as Ginsberg realises, the poem generally fails to capture, and in turn produce, spiritual insights of a transcendental nature, because it merely records the *desire* for visions and the subsequent menace to the integrity of the self that this yearning generates; transcribing not the thing-in-itself but its idea, or rather its apprehension; describing, rather than enacting.

²⁴ Portugés, pp.125-26.

²⁵ 'Howl', p.13.

²⁶ 'Mescaline', p.106.

This reflection of the visionary coincides with its rationalisation for poetical purposes: the very project of the ‘drug poems’ is foregrounded in a relation of causality – namely, taking a hallucinogen in order to embody a visionary consciousness and write a good poem. Cause, effect, product delivered. However, as Ginsberg himself analysed, ‘observation impeded function – in the sense that the desire to write a tremendous visionary poem on acid always plunged me into self-conscious hell’.²⁷ What Ginsberg perceived, years later, is that this reasoning, this link of causality at the core of the poetical process is mostly counterproductive because it is, above all, *counterintuitive*: it resorts to a calculation that works against the intuition – the human faculty which symbolises ‘the most direct channel between man and the realm of absolute spiritual reality’, a legacy from Blake as well as from Emersonian Transcendentalism –²⁸ a calculation that snaps back at itself.

This is how the very project of the ‘drug poems’ – poems which manifest the deliberate intent, through chemical aids, to perceive visions and pass them on to the reader – remains mostly inadequate to reach their quixotic goal: because the intrinsic reflexivity that this project engenders obstructs the formulation of intuitive insights – the very modality of the visionary – thereby ruining the poet’s chances of encountering, and relaying, visions of cosmic redemption.

²⁷ Portugés, p.49.

²⁸ Robert Caponigri, ‘Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp.239-56 (p.242).

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