



# Mechanics And Poetics: William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg - Alexandre Ferrere

Alexandre Ferrere

## ► To cite this version:

Alexandre Ferrere. Mechanics And Poetics: William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg - Alexandre Ferrere. Beatdom, 2018. hal-03849757

**HAL Id: hal-03849757**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03849757>**

Submitted on 21 Dec 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Mechanics And Poetics: William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg

By Alexandre Ferrere

William Carlos Williams played an important part in making “Howl” a well-known poem, especially in terms of communication. Indeed, William Carlos Williams wrote an introduction for the poem, in which he admitted that Allen Ginsberg “disturbed”<sup>1</sup> him. Allen Ginsberg wrote many times to his relatives and friends how glad he was to have a poet he admired writing him an introduction. But while Allen Ginsberg was thrilled, writing to Eugene Brooks in 1956 that “W.C. Williams has written another introduction”<sup>2</sup> or to his father that “W.C. Williams read “Howl” and liked it”<sup>3</sup>, William Carlos Williams was more cautious. First of all, this introduction is “strange” because, according to Barry Miles, “it read almost as if he were confusing Allen Ginsberg with someone else”.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, though we learn in a 1952 letter to Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady that Williams contacted Random House about Ginsberg's poetry,<sup>5</sup> he wrote about his poems that “the first look is favorable”,<sup>6</sup> which is less expressive than Ginsberg's point of view. Worse, Williams also appeared to be criticizing “Howl” and Allen Ginsberg's writing style in an interview of 1960:

His longer lines don't seem to fit in with the modern tendency at all. Retrograde. I didn't like them at all in *Howl*!<sup>7</sup>

And later:

It has been accidental that I knew Allen Ginsberg. [...] But I am not thoroughly satisfied with what he has done. I have told him – I mean I am disgusted with him and his long lines.<sup>8</sup>

William Carlos Williams was also dissatisfied with the poems the young Allen Ginsberg sent with a letter. Williams wrote about them that “in this mode perfection is basic”.<sup>9</sup> Concerning this point, Allen Ginsberg declared that Williams was “excusing himself for rejecting [his] own idealized iambic rhymes”<sup>10</sup> or that he “reproved [him] correctly”,<sup>11</sup> changing thus his future writing style, just

---

<sup>1</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected Poems: 1947-1997*. New York : HarperCollins, 2006, p. 819.

William Carlos Williams also wrote an introduction for Ginsberg's collection *Empty Mirror* four years before *Howl* but it was only published in 1961.

<sup>2</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript, and Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, With Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts, and Bibliography*. Ed. Barry Miles. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. p. 151.

<sup>3</sup>*Id.*

<sup>4</sup>Miles, Barry. *Allen Ginsberg - A Biography*. London: Virgin, 2002, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup>Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews With William Carlos Williams: "Speaking Straight Ahead"* Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin. New York: New Directions, 1976, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup>Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952-1995*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000, p.

like we will see in “Howl”. Allen Ginsberg remembered a conversation he had with Williams in his journals of 1952:

He: if you cut down everything no joking, no looseness, your book has a chance of making some kind of impression different from the general run.<sup>12</sup>

The situation seemed paradoxical: on the one hand Williams wrote introductions to Ginsberg and even gave him some advice; On the other hand, he appeared somewhat distant. In fact, this is maybe because Williams did not feel very close with the Beat Generation (then again a paradoxical relation). Indeed, in a document about the reading at the Six Gallery, written by Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, we can read:

I should, at this point, remark that William Carlos Williams [...] had remained in closest touch with these young poets [...]<sup>13</sup>

It appears that there is a bridge between the Beat Generation (and Allen Ginsberg) and William Carlos Williams, which looks more like a one-way relationship than like a real friendship. Indeed, while we saw that Allen Ginsberg and the Beats felt very close to him, the opposite is not so true as we can read in an interview of Williams:

W.W.: As for the Beats, you have been associated with a number of them [...] and I think that at least in the beginning of the movement there might have been the idea that –

W.C.W.: One of them? And then that's where we parted company.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas in a letter, William Carlos Williams wrote about “a young poet, Allen Ginsberg, of Paterson – who is coming to personify the place for me”.<sup>15</sup> William Carlos Williams was really seen as a poetry teacher by the Beats who met him several times<sup>16</sup> and Allen Ginsberg also qualified him as his “mentor”.<sup>17</sup> He even had the idea of a novel with “W.C.W.'s letter in mind”, of “a local-work Paterson Revisited”.<sup>18</sup> which of course is a reminder of Williams' major work *Paterson*. This is why, many times, the relation between the Beats and Williams is depicted with the lexical field of teaching, like Michael McClure writing about Whalen (both being Beat poets): “Whalen was using the American speech that William Carlos Williams instructed us to use [...]”.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the relation between Allen Ginsberg and Williams is more than relevant regarding their respective poems. Indeed, we saw that thanks to William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg had the opportunity to, first, have commentaries on his own poetry and then to have an introduction by a famous poet. But

---

214.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>12</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems, 1937-1952*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2006, p. 383.

<sup>13</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>14</sup>Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews...*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: Grove, 1977, p. XV.

<sup>16</sup>Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>17</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early...*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

according to Allen Ginsberg, Williams did not see the “strength and gaiety there is beyond”<sup>20</sup> the poem.

The relation between Ginsberg and Williams began when Ginsberg, as an admirer, wrote to Williams “in the late forties”.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in Ginsberg's reading list of the late forties, we can find several mentions of Williams' books like for example *Collected Poetry 1921-1931* or *The Wedge* in July 1946,<sup>22</sup> *Paterson Book 2* in August 1946<sup>23</sup> or *Paterson Book 1* in September 1946.<sup>24</sup> Allen Ginsberg would also read Williams in August 1954 (“*Complete Collected Poems*”, “*The Build Up* (Novel)”, “*The Desert Music*”<sup>25</sup>), in April-May 1955 (“*Selected Essays*”<sup>26</sup>) and between August and December 1956 (“*Kora in Hell*”<sup>27</sup>). Of course, those reading lists, distant from several years, show the lingering admiration Allen Ginsberg maintained regarding Williams. What is more is that Allen Ginsberg wrote a “review of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (Book 1) for the *Passaic Valley Examiner* [...] expecting to catch the eye of Williams”<sup>28</sup> in September 1946. This reveals the direct, almost immediate impact and fascination Allen Ginsberg had on Williams, which is maybe why Ginsberg wrote in his journals: “Dedicate New Book if any ever to Williams”.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Allen Ginsberg appeared to believe in being the only one with Williams to “stand so solidly on terra firma”.<sup>30</sup> He also wrote to his father that “Williams stands out as the only beautiful soul among the great poets who has tearfully clung to his humanity [...]”.<sup>31</sup>

This link between them is mentioned in a 1956 letter to Mark Van Doren, in which Allen Ginsberg declared that he “wrote a long poem still Williams style”, referring to “*Siesta In Xbalba*”<sup>32</sup> written in 1954. Indeed, the structure of the poem is close to some of Williams' poems. This is revealed by the use of triadic verses<sup>33</sup> and of short lines in order to mimic the natural breath:

Jump in time

to the immediate future,

another poem:<sup>34</sup>

In fact, in another letter to John Hollander of 1958, Allen Ginsberg explained that this poem was

---

<sup>20</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original..., op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148

<sup>25</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties, 1954-1958*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: HarperPerennial, 1996, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 213

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 411

<sup>28</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>29</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties..., op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early..., op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*. Ed. Michael Schumacher. London: Bloomsbury, 2001, p. 70.

<sup>32</sup>Tytell, John. *Naked Angels: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs*. New York, NY: Grove, 1991, p. 100.

<sup>33</sup>A group of three verses.

<sup>34</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected..., op. cit.*, p. 114.

“fragments of mostly prose” of his journals then re-arranged on the page.<sup>35</sup> According to Ginsberg's biographer Barry Miles, it was Williams who “suggested the poetic possibilities of his journal prose”<sup>36</sup> which led to the composition of Ginsberg's “The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour”<sup>37</sup> in 1947. Allen Ginsberg talked about this idea in an interview: “I went over my prose writings, and I took out little four- or five- line fragments [...]”.<sup>38</sup> He also recommended this method to Herbert Huncke in a 1965 letter.<sup>39</sup> This notion of arrangement is very important when it comes to analyzing the poetry of Allen Ginsberg regarding Williams' influence. In fact, even Louis Ginsberg recommended his son reading Williams on this idea of arrangement: “All art is arrangement (see W.C. Williams)”.<sup>40</sup> For example, the poem “For The Soul of The Planet is Wakening” published “before September 21, 1970”<sup>41</sup> is a re-arrangement of the end of a text written on “Dec. 14-15, 1969”.<sup>42</sup> This is also the case for the poem “Her Engagement”, which is according to Bill Morgan a “prose journal description [...] created in 1952” which “reappeared as a poem in 1955”.<sup>43</sup> Concerning the poem “Siesta in Xbalba”, it is indeed made of lines extracted from Ginsberg journals and, according to him, it shows “no improvements on Williams”.<sup>44</sup> For example, the passage below is taken from his 1953 journals:

But Deathhead in front of me on portal's here and thinks its way thru centuries – reveal to me, eyesee,  
the thought of the same night I sit in sat once and many times before by artisan other than I [...] and  
only the crude skull figurements left with its wornaway plumes and indecipherable headdresses of  
intellect and thought [...]<sup>45</sup>

This very extract had been rearranged in the poem and became a time and space transcending poetic meditation:

but deathhead's here  
on portal still and thinks its way  
through centuries the thought  
of the same night in which I sit  
in skully meditation  
– sat in many times before by  
artisan other than me  
[...]  
and only the crude skull figurement's  
gaunt insensible glare is left

---

<sup>35</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit., p. 162.

<sup>36</sup>Miles, Barry. op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>37</sup>*Id.*

<sup>38</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. op. cit., p. 269.

<sup>39</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, op. cit., p. 315.

<sup>40</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>41</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>42</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>43</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *Wait Till I'm Dead: Uncollected Poems*. Ed. Bill Morgan. UK: Penguin, 2016, p. 213.

<sup>44</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, op. cit., p. 214.

<sup>45</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early...*, op. cit., p. 31.

with broken plumes of sensation  
headdresses of indecipherable intellect,  
[...]<sup>46</sup>

The semantic shift from journals to a poem is interesting to analyze. Indeed, there are several changes that show a deliberate choice with a poetic tool giving more importance to sensations than to precise meanings. For example, as written above, Allen Ginsberg wrote in his journals “indecipherable headdresses of intellect and thought”. This later becomes “headdresses of indecipherable intellect” in the poem. The “headdresses” are not “indecipherable” anymore, whereas the “intellect” becomes conversely “indecipherable”. In a way, the new word targeted by “indecipherable” adds mystery to mystery, and gives birth to new sensations. By underlining the mysterious ways “intellect and thought” work, a mystic sensation and an invisible sense of impenetrable eternity arise. This is firstly because the intellect and thoughts are inner perspectives which involve interpretations, and then because even when interpreted, they are lost in time. In his journals, the sensation is purely material and so it gives a documentary background for his reflexions. To some extent, it is a principle Allen Ginsberg would use a lot, like for example the famous association “hydrogen jukebox” we found in “Howl”. The aim is to reveal new sensations as well as new meanings, as if to uncover the reality behind the words or to unmask the affective charge stuck on words. In this poem, the background is purely factual and material and his poetic vision offers a timeless bridge leading toward a contemplation the reader can share with the poet. This is, in a way, what John Tytell concluded about the influence of Williams on Ginsberg. Indeed, this example can be an illustration of “Williams' theory that objects actually surrounding the poet could be assembled into the stuff of poetry as effectively as myth or history”.<sup>47</sup>

The influence of Williams is once again paradoxical when it comes to his use of triads. Indeed, Allen Ginsberg stated that the use of triads came without his influence:

Later in revising I've noticed a tendency – revising year pile of notes – to adjust notes to small groups of lines as in 3-line stanza, begun however before reading Williams late forms –<sup>48</sup>

But at the same time, in a list about “mindful arrangement of open verse forms”, Allen Ginsberg wrote that the “breath stop” of open verses and the idea of “new breath, new line”<sup>49</sup> are inherited from Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Williams. Allen Ginsberg also happened to advocate the “division of mental ideas”, inherited from Gregory Corso and Williams.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, we can say that Allen Ginsberg was in a way instinctively attracted by Williams' poetry because he found in it a better way to express his inner poetry.

---

<sup>46</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>47</sup>Tytell, John. *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>48</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>49</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed on the Tongue*. Ed. Donald Allen. Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox, 1980, p. 153.

<sup>50</sup>*Id.*

But to find his own poetic style, Allen Ginsberg had to either cut out from Williams' imagism<sup>51</sup> and triadic verses, or to extend it. In a way, he chose both. In the notes concerning a long stanza,<sup>52</sup> he admitted that “the triadic form of William Carlos Williams definitely broke down”. He had to change and he decided to quit the Williams' “little breath groups” to “longer breaths”, close to the process of thinking.<sup>53</sup> At this moment, Allen Ginsberg went toward long lines, extending the tradition of Christopher Smart and Walt Whitman as a claimed inspiration, and he wrote the final long lines of “Howl”. Allen Ginsberg developed the idea of how longer lines corresponded more to his own poetry and how it irritated Williams in the notes of the recording of “Howl”, in 1959:

Ideally each line of Howl is a single breath unit. My breath is long – that's the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath. It probably bugs Williams now [...]<sup>54</sup>

This difference of opinion between them concerning the long lines is also revealed in a letter to Richard Eberhart:

W.C. Williams has been observing speech rhythms for years trying to find a “regular measure” – he's mistaken I think.<sup>55</sup>

But while Allen Ginsberg came to this statement in the writing of “Howl”, he acknowledged his experimentation with Williams' poetry. Allen Ginsberg recalled in an interview “using William's basic perception” before “extending the line out”.<sup>56</sup> To summarize Allen Ginsberg's poetic orientation, we can quote a line of his journals: he was trying to write “Poetry like Williams but with magical vocabulary”.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, what appears to be at the center of Ginsberg's interests in Williams is not really the measures and rhythms in themselves, but the fact that a poet can find his own measures and rhythms. This is implicitly written in a 1960 short essay entitled *What Way I Write*:

Short lines in William Carlos Williams are balanced mainly by a relative weight of phrasing – speech-size, special emphasis, weight as mental imagery, silence indicated, etc.<sup>58</sup>

The most important word in this extract is “relative”. It means that it is a deliberate choice and though Williams influenced Ginsberg, the latter used his own “relative weight of phrasing”, corresponding to his own aim. Therefore, William Carlos Williams opened a road for a subjective form of poetry, useful for Ginsberg just like Walt Whitman's open verses and William Blake's visionary poetry. In fact, Allen Ginsberg followed “the prosodic precepts of William Carlos

---

<sup>51</sup> Imagism is an Anglo-american poetic movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aim of the imagists was to work with realistic images and clear words in order to obtain a true image of reality. Among the group were Ezra Pound, H. D. and William Carlos Williams.

<sup>52</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164

<sup>54</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>55</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>56</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>57</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

<sup>58</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

Williams based on breath-measure”.<sup>59</sup> This subjectivity of form is later explained by Allen Ginsberg:

[...] I generally compose in long lines, depending on how falls my attempt to become conscious of my thought, look aside and notate it.<sup>60</sup>

Another important point between Allen Ginsberg and Williams is that both have influenced each other. Indeed, impressed by the work of William Carlos Williams as we saw, Allen Ginsberg started an epistolary relation with Williams, before finally meeting him. And this epistolary correspondence had an influence on Williams too. In fact, Williams informed Allen Ginsberg in a letter that he put one of his letters in his long and famous poem *Paterson*.<sup>61</sup> This event is also recalled in Ginsberg's 1952 journals in “Notes after an evening with William Carlos Williams”.<sup>62</sup> In this letter, Allen Ginsberg described himself as an “unknown young poet” writing to an “unknown old poet” and attached some of his poems. He also wrote about finding his own poetic voice:

I envision for myself some kind of new speech [...] I am not following in your traces to be poetic: though I know you will be pleased to realize that at least one actual citizen of your community has inherited your experience [...]. But harking back to a few sentences previous, I may need a new measure myself [...]<sup>63</sup>

The fact that Williams included this letter reveals he felt like Allen Ginsberg was being an important figure of the city of Paterson, as a young aspiring local poet and as a part of “the local material”<sup>64</sup> as Williams would say. Later, Williams would also, unsuccessfully, attempt to help Ginsberg to earn a Guggenheim grant.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, including Ginsberg's letter into the poem *Paterson* shows that he considered him as part of the landscape, completed thus the poem as a whole description of Paterson, with people who influenced and who were influenced by the city, making the personal public and the public personal. Allen Ginsberg also campaigned for Williams' work. This is the case for his play *Many Loves* as Barry Miles wrote:

Allen had also been trying to help the Living Theater raise money to put on William Carlos Williams' play *Many Loves*, and gave a benefit reading.<sup>66</sup>

As the title indicates, this play explores some of the different aspects of love. Allen Ginsberg composed a poem entitled “Many Loves” too, which described his homosexual relation with Neal Cassady. This poem is echoing the play because Allen Ginsberg also wrote about the many facets of love, never separating physical from spiritual love: “he taught me the love of his cock and the secrets of his mind”<sup>67</sup>, “we felt each other other's flesh and owned each other / bodies and souls”<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>61</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 354.

<sup>62</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup>Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. New York: New Directions, 1951, p. 174. Print.

<sup>64</sup>Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews...*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>65</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

<sup>66</sup>Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>67</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 165.

or “ass of lone delight, ass of mankind, so / beautiful and hollow, dowry of Mind and Angels”.<sup>69</sup> It seems that Allen Ginsberg used crude words throughout this poem as a contrast tool for the mindfulness this erotic relation provided him, as if to make the situation both down-to-earth and spiritual, like two sides of the same coin. But what is more is that there are similarities between the play and the poem. For example, the expression “she was a somewhat plump but alluring little animal”<sup>70</sup> from the play echoes to the opening verse of the poem “Neal Cassady was my animal”.<sup>71</sup> In fact, Allen Ginsberg wrote a complementary poem in his journals which begins before the published one.<sup>72</sup> Both are put together under the same title, “Many Loves”. In this additional poem, Allen Ginsberg claimed to “speak out boldly” and confessed:

Dom why reject me years thereafter? I was ever your lover, that was  
my great pleasure, remember me then, and bless me  
again<sup>73</sup>

This is the same the case of disillusionment we can read in the play:

[...] I say whatever he does  
you may be sure when you flatter  
yourself that he's deceiving you  
or slighting you, running here  
and there, it's nothing of the sort.  
You'd be fortunate if he  
had that much feeling in him for you.<sup>74</sup>

In fact, it depicts the relationship between Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady quite well. The latter was known for being sexually active with both men and women. As Barry Miles recalled, after sleeping with Allen Ginsberg (as described in “Many Loves”) Neal Cassady “reorganized his schedule” in order to split his time between his work, learning how to write with Jack Kerouac, his relation with LuAnne (Cassady's sixteen-year-old wife at that time), his nights with Allen Ginsberg and later his relation with another future wife, Carolyn Cassady.<sup>75</sup> Allen Ginsberg accepted this strange relation by love but it really grieved him. It soon was worse when Neal Cassady started to claim that he was not attracted by men and that he was “forcing” himself “unconsciously”.<sup>76</sup> This situation clearly depressed Allen Ginsberg who deeply fell in love with him. As Barry Miles noted:

---

<sup>69</sup>*Id.*

<sup>70</sup>Williams, William Carlos, and John Connop. Thirlwall. *Many Loves and Other Plays*. New York: New Directions, 1961, p. 83. Print.

<sup>71</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>72</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

<sup>73</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

<sup>74</sup>Williams, William Carlos, and John Connop. Thirlwall. *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>75</sup>Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

“Allen had become obsessed with him and his rejection hurt deeply”.<sup>77</sup> This situation corresponds to the words of Williams' play and of Ginsberg's in the poem:

But I made my first mistake, and made him then and there my master, and  
bowed my head, and holding his buttock  
[...]  
– And I lie here naked in the dark, dreaming<sup>78</sup>

About dreaming, and not as anecdotal as it may sound, Allen Ginsberg dreamed a lot about Williams. This shows obviously how influential and important Williams came to be in Ginsberg's life. For example, he dreamed of a family reunion with Williams,<sup>79</sup> of a “class in the New School with sick W.C. Williams course in Abstruse Mobility [...]”.<sup>80</sup> He also wrote about much more revealing dreams underlining how close he felt to Williams, like when he dreamed he found his drafts and unseen poems “returned from Williams [...]”,<sup>81</sup> of a radio broadcasting “a class with a program interlocuted by WC Williams [...]”<sup>82</sup> or when he dreamed about Williams teaching him in China<sup>83</sup>, advising him “take your / chances / on / your accuracy”.<sup>84</sup> Allen Ginsberg, following Williams' precepts, wrote about those dreams and put some in his poetry. In fact, the advice Williams gave him in a dream described above is to be found in a 1984 poem entitled “Written in My Dream by W.C. Williams”, written with Williams' style and ideas.<sup>85</sup>

Actually, they became so close that Ginsberg sent postcards to him<sup>86</sup> and at one point Williams even confided to Ginsberg his fear of death.<sup>87</sup> This idea of death hovering over Williams is also present in Ginsberg's poetry, as in a 1959 poem entitled “Mescaline”:

What can Williams be thinking in Paterson, death so much on him  
so soon so soon  
Williams, what is death?<sup>88</sup>

In fact, when William Carlos Williams died in 1963, Allen Ginsberg was in India, on the campus of the University of Benares. A professor of German handed him the newspaper about Williams' death. According to Barry Miles, he wrote to Gregory Corso “I saw the Big Dipper in the sky, that's all”.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>78</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>79</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>81</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>83</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

<sup>84</sup>*Id.*

<sup>85</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 901-902.

<sup>86</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>87</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>88</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>89</sup>Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 314.

Just like Williams' advised him at the beginning of his career, he arranged his prose in a poem entitled "Death News": "Williams is in the Big Dipper. He isn't dead [...]"<sup>90</sup> He also mentioned the "Passaic" and "a Goddess in the river",<sup>91</sup> referring of course to the figure of the muse in Williams' "The Wanderer" (we will focus on it later), as if everything came to a full circle. But the most important notion of this poem is that Williams is not dead (though the first longer version of the poem is more sensitive<sup>92</sup>). In fact, even if he later wrote that Williams' poetry followed Tennessee Williams "to a white dusty grave",<sup>93</sup> Allen Ginsberg explained in "Death News" that "there's a life moving out of his pages".<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, in a poem entitled "CXXV" written in 1984, Allen Ginsberg wrote about Williams "surviving death".<sup>95</sup> This vision of an eternal poetry echoes in a way to Allen Ginsberg's own approaching death. Indeed, he wrote in "Things I'll Not Do (Nostalgias)", which can be considered as his last poem, "No more sweet summers with lovers, teaching [...] Williams".<sup>96</sup> But before teaching Williams, he had to read him, if not imitate him, in order to find his own poetic style.

The influence of Williams on Ginsberg's poetry is many times admitted by Ginsberg himself. It was not unusual for Allen Ginsberg to describe William Carlos Williams as his "own best teacher".<sup>97</sup> And because Williams and Allen Ginsberg have met, he also described him as a "living poetry guru".<sup>98</sup> Moreover, biographer Barry Miles wrote that "under the influence of William Carlos Williams", Allen Ginsberg made "radical changes in his writing style".<sup>99</sup> This is particularly visible in Ginsberg's major poem "Howl". According to the poet himself in his annotated drafts of the poem,<sup>100</sup> several passages had been written with William Carlos Williams' poetry in mind. For example, the following passage contains a reference to Williams' poetry:

who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window,  
jumped in the filthy Passaic, [...]<sup>101</sup>

According to Ginsberg in his notes,<sup>102</sup> the mention of the "filthy Passaic" refers the Williams' poem "The Wanderer". Though the expression "the filthy Passaic" in the passage above is to be found

---

<sup>90</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 305.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian Journals: Notebooks Diary Blank Pages Writings March 1962 - May 1963. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.* p. 189-193.

<sup>93</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>94</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 305.

<sup>95</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>96</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 1161.

<sup>97</sup>Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 422.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 414

<sup>99</sup>Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>100</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit.

<sup>101</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>102</sup>Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit., p. 128.

two times in Williams' poem (the first one being "The Passaic, that filthy river"<sup>103</sup>), Allen Ginsberg rather mentioned a precise verse:

And the filthy Passaic consented!<sup>104</sup>

This particular verse is meaningful when it is re-contextualized in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl". First, it is necessary to understand the background of Williams' poem from which "the filthy Passaic" is taken. In fact, the poem is about "a youthful poet" who "plunges his hands" in the Passaic River asking to be blessed by "his Muse".<sup>105</sup> This takes the form of an exchange:

"Enter, youth, into this bulk!

Enter, river, into this young man!"<sup>106</sup>

Then, once the context of Williams' poem is in mind, it is interesting to wonder why Allen Ginsberg wrote this passage of "Howl" with this specific reference. In fact, the ones who "jumped in the Filthy Passaic" are "the best minds of [his] generation" and it also includes Allen Ginsberg himself. Moreover, the Williams' poem is the story of a young poet, which is the case of Allen Ginsberg in 1955 (he was then twenty-nine years old). Therefore, we can estimate that Allen Ginsberg is talking about himself in this passage, involving himself in the quest of a poet struck by a mystical inspiration. This thus made the verse "and the filthy Passaic consented" of Williams' poem prophetic regarding Ginsberg's career. Furthermore, concerning a genetic origin of the very structure of "Howl", Allen Ginsberg admitted that his "original intention was to build on the triadic ladder form established by W.C. Williams"<sup>107</sup> and this intention can be seen in the first draft of the poem:

I saw the best minds of my generation  
generation destroyed by madness  
starving, ~~mystical~~, naked,<sup>108</sup>

This passage of course looks like the use of triads Williams made in his poems, for example in "Shadows":

Shadow cast by the street light  
under the stars,  
the head is tilted back,<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939*. New York: New Directions, 1986, p. 115. Print.

<sup>104</sup> *Id.*

<sup>105</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original..., op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>106</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I..., op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>107</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original..., op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>109</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume II 1939-1962*. New York: New Directions, 1988, p. 308. Print.

Allen Ginsberg also refers to Williams in another passage of “Howl” in which “meter”<sup>110</sup> refers to the author of *Paterson*<sup>111</sup> and to his “relative measure to include his own breath's spoken cadence”.<sup>112</sup> This point is also pointed out in a Ginsberg's poetic essay:

Shakespeare left his breath for us to hear his Cadence, so did  
Shelley and William Carlos Williams and Kerouac.<sup>113</sup>

In a long letter he wrote to Richard Eberhart, Allen Ginsberg described meticulously all the mechanism of “Howl”. In this letter, he wrote several times about how Williams influenced his poetry and the writing of “Howl”:

The Long Line I use came after 7yrs. Work with fixed iambic rhyme, and 4 yrs. Work with Williams' short line free form – which as you must know has its own mad rules – indefinable tho they be at present –<sup>114</sup>

And Allen Ginsberg added about his use of juxtaposed words:

This is a curious but really quite logical development of Pound-Fenelossa-Chinese Written Character-imagist W. C. Williams' practice.<sup>115</sup>

These two extracts underline how influential Williams was on Allen Ginsberg's way of writing poetry. These lines imply that Allen Ginsberg had a solid knowledge of Williams' skills. As an imagist, Williams stated in *Paterson* “no idea but in things”<sup>116</sup> which becomes “no idea besides facts”<sup>117</sup> later in the poem. According to Allen Ginsberg in an essay on Williams, this means having “actual contact with the object, rather than verbal”.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, still according to Ginsberg, this also implies that the poet has to write about the particulars:

If you want to describe a tree, don't try to describe every atom, and don't try to describe every leaf [...]. You have to pick out that aspect of the tree [...]. Whatever details, whatever “particularity” of the tree that strikes your eye first, or stands out in the tree.<sup>119</sup>

He also quoted Williams in his journals about focusing on a particular detail to describe an object: “The true value is that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself”.<sup>120</sup> In fact, Ginsberg and Williams would work on this idea when they made a poem “about a piece of old concrete, a sliver of tin, a pin from a loom, and some ancient dogshit”.<sup>121</sup> His interpretation of imagism led to substantial changes and choices in Ginsberg's “Howl”. For example, in the first draft of the poem (influenced by the triadic verses of Williams), we can read:

---

<sup>110</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 138..

<sup>111</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>113</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>114</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>116</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson...* op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>118</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>120</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>121</sup> Tytell, John. op. cit., p. 98.

who passed through universities  
with radiant cool eyes hallucinating  
anarchy & Blake-light tragedy  
among the post-war cynical scholars,<sup>122</sup>

In the notes, we learn that the word “anarchy” is changed to “Arkansas” in the final poem. The reason is that it is a “more concrete thing-name for an abstract word”.<sup>123</sup> This is exactly the sense Allen Ginsberg gave to Williams’ “no idea but in things”. He would indeed say in a short essay on Williams about his principles that what should prevail is “not a change of ideas” but “a change of directive stance”.<sup>124</sup> Another example of his vision of Williams’ concepts is to be found in his 1955 journals:

Williams has refined the reproduction of images to a science – that is stripped bare for utility. [...] Do away with symbols and present the facts of the experience.<sup>125</sup>

To a certain extent, this is implicitly written in a mention removed from the final poem in the draft of the last part of “Howl”, entitled “Footnotes to Howl”: “Holy Particulars”.<sup>126</sup> It also refers to advice Williams gave to Ginsberg: to focus on “the minute particulars”.<sup>127</sup> And these “minute particulars” are taken from William Blake’s “Jerusalem” (“every Minute Particular is Holy”,<sup>128</sup>). Moreover, each verse of “Howl” refers to a particular event or is a specific reference transformed into a global evocation and thought-provoking juxtapositions. This cannot be understood without the influence of Williams. Indeed, in the letter to Richard Eberhart, Allen Ginsberg described his technique of “imagery” as based on the “1920’s W.C.W imagistically observed detail collapsed together by interior associative logic”.<sup>129</sup> Allen Ginsberg also admitted in a class on Williams<sup>130</sup> (as well as in a documentary on Williams<sup>131</sup>) that the poem “To Elsie” was a great inspiration for “Howl”. In a 1975 Naropa class, Allen Ginsberg exchanged with one of his students after reading an extract of “To Elsie”:

Student: Had you read that when you started *Howl*?

Ginsberg: Yes, I had read that – I had that very much in mind when I wrote *Howl*.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>124</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, op. cit., p. 334.

<sup>125</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, op. cit., p. 142.

<sup>126</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>127</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>128</sup> Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *Blake Complete Writings; with Variant Readings*. London: Oxford UP, 1972, p. 708.

<sup>129</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>130</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>131</sup> *Spotlight On Voices And Visions: William Carlos Williams*. Dir. Richard P. Rogers. Perf. Allen Ginsberg, Marjorie Perloff. *Voices and Visions Spotlight: William Carlos Williams*. Annenberg Foundation, n.d. Web. 21 July 2016, 38<sup>th</sup> min. <<http://www.learner.org/catalog/extras/vvspot/Williams.html>>.

<sup>132</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, op. cit., p. 133.

The comparison between the opening lines of both poems offers a concrete parallelism. In “To Elsie”, William Carlos Williams wrote:

The pure products of America  
go crazy –  
mountain folk from Kentucky [...] <sup>133</sup>

And Allen Ginsberg wrote at the beginning of “Howl”:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked, [...] <sup>134</sup>

The form is different from Williams' poem in the Ginsberg's final version, but it is necessary to insist that it was originally written in triadic verses in his early drafts:

I saw the best minds of my generation  
generation destroyed by madness  
starving, ~~mystical~~, naked, [...] <sup>135</sup>

If we add to this intention of form the content of the poem, the lexical field of madness and of a whole generation being oppressed by an era, the similarities are uncanny. To some extent, it is interesting to notice that there are also resemblances between the second part of “Howl” and some of Williams' poems like “April”. In “Howl”, there is a base word (Moloch) which acts both as a rhythmic tool and as a symbol:

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jail-  
house and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judg-  
ment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned govern-  
ments! <sup>136</sup>

In “April”, there also is a base word: “Moral” (there is the expression “I believe” repeated too, later in the poem <sup>137</sup>):

Moral  
it looses me  
Moral  
it supports me  
Moral  
it has never ceased  
to flow [...] <sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>134</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>135</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>136</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>137</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, op. cit., p. 333-335.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p. 333.

Furthermore, Williams' verses look and sounds like another of Ginsberg's poems, published in his journals of 1956:

While I was alive  
I knew that others would come

While I was alive  
I wrote as if I would die<sup>139</sup>

Besides the influence of Williams on "Howl" in terms of forms, it is interesting to focus on Williams' influences on speech, measures and rhythms too. The most influential account of Williams' influence is detailed several times by Allen Ginsberg, like for example in this 1968 interview:

I remember when visiting him in 1948 he said he had heard, on the street, a little fragment of speech: "I'll kick yuh eye". [...] "How could that be fitted into the old iambic stress count [...]" That's too subtle a gradation of rhythm to be measured by the relatively crude standard count of stress that was practiced.<sup>140</sup>

This anecdote marked the beginning of both a quest toward a new American poetry and an appeal to hear "the actual speech around you"<sup>141</sup> that offered new rhythms. In fact, what Williams was doing was to focus on "breath stop"<sup>142</sup> like Allen Ginsberg said in the same interview. But of course, Ginsberg adapted this practice to his own poetry and went "forward from Williams",<sup>143</sup> in order to write a poetry that corresponded to his own "physical breath".<sup>144</sup> In fact, Ginsberg's poetry goes beyond a physical breath to reach a mental flow:

The poetry in Williams had depended a lot on little breath groups [...] and in Howl an extension into longer breaths [...] there is another possible approach to the measure of the line which is, not the way you would say it, a thought, but the way you would think it.<sup>145</sup>

So while Williams began a work on "breath stop" underlining the pure American speech, Ginsberg wrote on mental breath, extending therefore the physical sounds to inner reflections. John Tytell, quoting a passage of Kerouac's *Desolation Angels* wrote that "Kerouac compared Ginsberg to Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet because each comes on in *waves* of thought, not in phrases".<sup>146</sup> Nonetheless, Williams' ability to hear pure sounds and to turn them into poetry, containing thus real speech rhythms, influenced Allen Ginsberg. This new method was unconventional, if not in contradiction, with what was extolled before in, as quoted by Ginsberg, "the metric system described in 1923 by

---

<sup>139</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

<sup>140</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>141</sup> *Id.*

<sup>142</sup> *Id.*

<sup>143</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>144</sup> *Id.*

<sup>145</sup> *Id.*

<sup>146</sup> Tytell, John. *op. cit.*, p. 218.

the Secretary of the New England Association of Teachers of English”.<sup>147</sup> As Ginsberg also added, the former “mode of poetry lost track of music [...] of American speech”.<sup>148</sup> This episode of “I’ll kick yuh eye” is very important in Ginsberg’s life. Indeed, it acted like a revelation. Many years later he composed a poem in which he confessed it is one of the reasons he wrote poetry:

I write poetry because W.C. Williams living in Rutherford wrote New  
Jerseyesque “I kick yuh eye”, asking, how measure that in iam-  
bic pentameter?<sup>149</sup>

But though Williams’ sentence (he heard from a “Polish laborer”<sup>150</sup>) cannot be put in the usual poetic categories of rhythms, it is still a particular rhythm corresponding to the American speech, making thus a true American poetry both in style and content. Williams’ poetry appeared to Allen Ginsberg to be “absolutely natural”<sup>151</sup> and to come “from the ground that he stood on”,<sup>152</sup> that is to say a demystified poetry operating on a new level of measures; Williams was “hearing with raw ears”<sup>153</sup> and by doing so, discovering “all sorts of new unknown rhythms”,<sup>154</sup> that can be described as “pure products of America”.<sup>155</sup> In an interview, Allen Ginsberg said that Williams “remarked that American speech tends toward dactylic”<sup>156</sup> and according to his journals, Williams came to the conclusion that the anapest was “characteristic of American idiom”.<sup>157</sup> This “American idiom” is for Williams separated from English<sup>158</sup> and “has much to offer [...] that the English language has never heard of”.<sup>159</sup> Just like John Lardas underlined in *The Bop Apocalypse*, Williams and Ginsberg “rejected the idea of America as curator of an inherited European tradition”.<sup>160</sup> This is maybe why Williams was satisfied with the re-arrangement of Ginsberg’s prose into poetry, like for example with “The Bricklayer’s Lunch Hours”,<sup>161</sup> for the realist thematic, the pure language and the anti-poetical observations. In fact, Allen Ginsberg wrote in a letter that if he “ever worried about a technique in advance [he] wouldn’t be able to write a line”.<sup>162</sup> This revealed how much Williams’

---

<sup>147</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>148</sup> *Id.*

<sup>149</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 937.

<sup>150</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>151</sup> *Id.*

<sup>152</sup> *Id.*

<sup>153</sup> *Id.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>155</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>156</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. op. cit., p. 18.

A dactyl consists of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones.

<sup>157</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, op. cit., p. 136.

An anapest consists of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one.

<sup>158</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews...*, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>160</sup> Lardas, John. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2001, p. 143.

<sup>161</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>162</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, op. cit., p. 214.

poetry corresponded to what he was looking for, that is to say “the discovery of new appropriate forms”<sup>163</sup> and of “real rhythms of American poetry” from “raw spoken talk”.<sup>164</sup> In a letter in which Allen Ginsberg applied for a MacArthur Foundation grant, he wrote about his career and influences. In this letter, he enumerated some of his achievements:

15) Advancement of lineage and techniques of modern experimental verse forms in tradition and under direct guidance of W.C. Williams.<sup>165</sup>

At that point, it is necessary to study why Allen Ginsberg felt closer to William Carlos Williams than to Ezra Pound, for both of them were working on new forms. Williams even told Ginsberg that Pound “had a mystical ear”,<sup>166</sup> the pure sounds being what influenced a part of Ginsberg's work. In his journals, Williams and Pound are studied side by side by Ginsberg about the use of the ellipsis. To illustrate Williams, Ginsberg chose “The Red Wheelbarrow”, focusing on the “gap” between “upon” and “a red wheelbarrow” and underlining the “no significant relationship” between them.<sup>167</sup> For Pound, he chose “In a Station of The Metro”, studying once more the “gap”, this time between “faces” and “petals” and writing that it is “almost a simile”.<sup>168</sup> Later, he eventually came to the conclusion that he felt closer with Williams:

However the Cantos are too literary and [much of] the experience is aesthetic experience of aesthetic experience. He is concerned with generalizations, ethical, esthetic, etc. I am concerned with personal generalizations, or rather concretions of personal experience.

Williams has refined the reproduction of images to a science – that is stripped bare for utility.<sup>169</sup>

What is underlined in this passage is what Ginsberg liked in Williams: an experience, not an over-poetization of an experience. In an interview, Allen Ginsberg also highlighted another difference between Pound and Williams: while Pound was focusing on what can be called an emotional rhythm (“each rhythm had to rise out of a real emotion”<sup>170</sup>), Williams was listening to the “little rhythms” contained in “actual speech”.<sup>171</sup> Nevertheless, he would later declare that Williams and Pound's “sense of meter and music” were “at the heart of [his] white space idea”,<sup>172</sup> and that both of them, also helped to get beyond the traditional poetry.<sup>173</sup> In fact, though Ginsberg met and taught classes on Ezra Pound, it seems that Williams had a greater influence on him. This is maybe because of the bridge Allen Ginsberg built between Williams and his Buddhist beliefs.

The influence of Williams on Ginsberg can indeed be defined according to Ginsberg's

---

<sup>163</sup> *Id.*

<sup>164</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...., op. cit.*, p. 278.

<sup>165</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...., op. cit.*, p. 408.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>167</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...., op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>168</sup> *Id.*

<sup>169</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...., op. cit.*, p. 141-142.

<sup>170</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107-108.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

personal projections on Williams' poetry. For example, he dreamed about Williams "entering Non-Being" after his death,<sup>174</sup> asked him if he was "prepared to be reborn" in a poem,<sup>175</sup> considered himself an "apprentice [...] to spiritual teachers" including Williams<sup>176</sup> and even compared him with Buddhist figures of compassion ("Tara, Quan Yin, Kannon"<sup>177</sup>). In other words, Allen Ginsberg seemed to have projected his own personal history into the poet's works: He saw in it what he wanted and needed to realize in order to achieve his own aim in his poetic work. This is why Ginsberg said that he wrote "mindful" poetry "based [it] on elements of William Carlos Williams".<sup>178</sup> But it goes beyond the simple fact that Williams embodied a poetic whole expressing Ginsberg's mind. Indeed, as a Buddhist enthusiastic, Allen Ginsberg found in the poetry of Williams an echo to the poetic wisdom and eastern assertions he encountered in his life. For example, when talking about Williams' engaged poem "To Elsie", Allen Ginsberg would describe it twice as a vision of "the karmic situation of America".<sup>179</sup> He would also call Williams' appreciation of pure sounds as "Williams' particular physical yoga [...] to yoke the mind".<sup>180</sup> Allen Ginsberg took as an example the verse "Atta boy! Atta boy!" from "To Greet a Letter-Carrier".<sup>181</sup> The poet precised later that Williams had expressed a "new modern emotion", that is to say a raw exchange that was not conveyed by poetry before Williams. In this poem, the truth of language is preserved, there are no filters holding back the reality of a situation, no separation between what is perceived and what is written. The poet disappeared behind the language and life takes its place back. The process is shaped like a circle, non-deformed like it can be when a particular event is transcribed. But it is not a simple act, for the poet offers a new poetic mediation between the individual and the external world, like rediscovering a poetic world, already there but hidden from accustomed eyes. The genius of Williams according to Ginsberg is then the unveiling of the poetry in everyday life. In Buddhism, one of the aims of meditating is to find the pure reality of the world, annihilating this way the differences between the one who meditates and the object of meditation. In fact, this relation between seeing and perceiving in Buddhism is very close to Williams' poetry: meditating means to erase the subjectivity contained in the act of perceiving; Williams' poetry aimed the preservation of the poetical purity of language, saving an "American prosody".<sup>182</sup> In a way, it is a manner to counter the decline of consciousness. Like Allen Ginsberg said quoting Williams: "A new

---

<sup>174</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>175</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>176</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

<sup>177</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>178</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 402.

<sup>179</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, *op. cit.*, p. 133-134.

<sup>180</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>181</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

<sup>182</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 115.

world is only a new mind”,<sup>183</sup> that is to say to offer a new way of collecting an exterior's information, it is necessary to develop in oneself the tools enabling this new reception of stimulus, free from subjectivity. Williams' work on finding an American prosody with its own rhythm is based, as we have seen, upon direct observations. This sense of pure perception is the one Ginsberg gave to Williams' famous poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow”:<sup>184</sup>

When Williams said “so much depends”, he means all human consciousness depends on direct observation of what's in front of you.<sup>185</sup>

In another class about Williams' poetry, Allen Ginsberg also underlined the Buddhist vision of this poem:

I always figured that 'so much depends' means his whole mind depends on the image. Or “so much”, a clear apprehension of the entire universe: just being there completely mindful.<sup>186</sup>

It is once again Allen Ginsberg projecting his own Buddhist interpretation on Williams' poem, giving it a new meaning, a direct and poetical application of a direct observation as described in Buddhism. Allen Ginsberg would also consider this poem as a true work of “spontaneous awareness”,<sup>187</sup> which he added corresponds to the Buddhist notion of “the Unborn”.<sup>188</sup> This is what Ginsberg would later explain: the practice of both a visionary poetry and of an “ordinary mind”.<sup>189</sup> It is interesting to know that Allen Ginsberg added an expression of his own in “Mind Writing Slogans”: “Ordinary Mind includes eternal perceptions”.<sup>190</sup> Therefore, this line contextualizes the aim of a poetry made with an “ordinary mind”: a poetry which is made of reality, not of realism. He declared:

[...] one's perception of everyday life becomes clear because there's no obstacle of trying to impose a thought on it, or there's no trying to impose a poem on it. Or obstacle trying to impose another world on it.<sup>191</sup>

Allen Ginsberg then depicted a poetry that was not trying to be a poetry, like Williams'. For example, still in his “Mind Writing Slogans”, we encounter Williams' expression “close to the nose”,<sup>192</sup> which means that what is most important for a mindful poetry is to learn how to look at what is before one's eyes. Ginsberg would also take the famous poem “This is Just to Say”, asking “What's so poetic about that?” and answering that, because of Williams' objectivity and “clarity”, the poem is “a picture of their entire domestic life”.<sup>193</sup> It means that thanks to Williams' practice of

---

<sup>183</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, p. 359.

<sup>184</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>185</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 271.

<sup>186</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>187</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

<sup>188</sup> *Id.*

<sup>189</sup> *Id.*

<sup>190</sup> Gach, Gary. *What Book!?: Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax, 1998, p. 197.

<sup>191</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>192</sup> Gach, Gary. *What Book!?:...*, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>193</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

true perception, without asking himself whether this was a poem or not, whether it was good or bad, a new natural poetry was able to bloom. The spontaneous picture, giving the reader a complete and poetic mindfulness to be experienced, is therefore a practical poetry corresponding to Ginsberg's Buddhism.

This Buddhist interpretation of Williams' poetry seems to be linked with specific contextual years and with the converging ideas of these years. Indeed, Allen Ginsberg recalled the year of 1948, when Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen (both beat poets) were already into Buddhism. What is interesting is that this is the year they met Williams, along with Ginsberg.<sup>194</sup> This maybe explain why Allen Ginsberg saw in Williams a Buddhist poetry: because everything was echoing, mixing a new poetry with statements on observation. Furthermore, Ginsberg often used the lexical field of Buddhism when speaking about Williams. For example, he declared in an interview "having to take refuge in Williams' "No idea/but in things".<sup>195</sup> The expression "to take refuge" is to be found in the Dharma, that is to say the teaching of Buddhism. Indeed, one of the main concepts in Buddhism is to take refuge in the three jewels which means the Dharma (the teaching), the Sangha (the spiritual community) and the Buddha (enlightenment).<sup>196</sup> The choice of vocabulary is intended because once again, in the same interview about his Buddhism, Allen Ginsberg established a link between what he called "spontaneous mind" (that is to say "first thought, best thought"<sup>197</sup>), and Williams' poetry:

That was always a basic principle, to write a poem by not writing a poem. It's Williams' practice. [...] because the spontaneous mind was more straightforward, full of strong detail.<sup>198</sup>

Later, he would emphasize the fact that William Carlos Williams was able to write the extraordinary ordinary of a "quotidian reality".<sup>199</sup> Ginsberg illustrated this idea with Williams' "Danse Russe",<sup>200</sup> and established parallels between "wakefulness"<sup>201</sup> and Williams' poem "Thursday". This poem is indeed about being present in a state of absolute consciousness and about wakening to the real world:

I have had my dream – like others –  
and it has come to nothing, so that  
I remain now carelessly  
with feet planted on the ground  
and loop up at the sky –

---

<sup>194</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 271.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>196</sup> Berzin, Alexander, Dr. "Refuge: A Safe and Meaningful Direction in Life." *Studybuddhism.com*. Study Buddhism, n.d. Web. 6 Aug. 2016. <<http://studybuddhism.com/en/tibetan-buddhism/about-buddhism/buddha-s-basic-message/refuge-a-safe-and-meaningful-direction-in-life>>.

<sup>197</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 406.

<sup>198</sup> *Id.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408

<sup>200</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, *op. cit.*, p. 86-87.

<sup>201</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 409.

feeling my clothes about me,  
the weight of my body in my shoes,  
the rim of my hat, air passing in and out  
at my nose – and decide to dream no more.<sup>202</sup>

In this poem, which Allen Ginsberg also linked with “the tradition of *vipassana*<sup>203</sup> practice”<sup>204</sup> and to “what people are like at heart”,<sup>205</sup> Williams experienced some Buddhist concepts. For example, he remained “carelessly” that is to say without any attachment. This is a central Buddhist idea: in order to find equanimity, one has to cut attachment to feelings and objects. Williams also wrote about numerous physical sensations, “feeling” his feet on the ground, his clothes, his weight, his hat and so on. This is once again linked to Buddhism and more precisely with what is called mindfulness: being able to live in the instant, to feel time passing and to be aware of the physical impact of one's body. Finally, Williams mentioned being aware of the “air passing in and out” in his nose. This situation is clearly a reminder of the practice of meditation. Indeed, one of the first meditation methods is to breathe while being focused on the flowing of the air. Traditionally, this method offers to the practitioner a meditative state. Allen Ginsberg wrote in a short essay on Williams, and especially in a passage about this poem, that breathing is “where Buddhism starts”.<sup>206</sup> Thus, the poem is clearly depicting a meditation process without explicitly being aware of it. Allen Ginsberg would also compare Williams' “Smell!” with the practice of meditation:

That's a key poem in the canon of William Carlos Williams – that is, picking up on his nose, and noticing his nose, which is not very very far from yogic beginning with the nose of meditation, vipassana practice.<sup>207</sup>

But this meditation process was a writing process for Williams, as he himself explained his writing method:

Forget all rules, forget all restrictions as to taste, as to what ought to be said, write for the pleasure of it [...] every form of resistance to a complete release should be abandoned.<sup>208</sup>

Allen Ginsberg also mentioned explicitly the poem “Thursday” in one of his poems he wrote in 1980:

One Thursday in 1919 William Carlos Williams stood in his  
shoes and remembered the breath coming in and out at his  
nose, [...] <sup>209</sup>

---

<sup>202</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>203</sup> Vipassana meditation is based on the perception of the true nature of reality.

<sup>204</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. op. cit., p. 385.

<sup>205</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>207</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. "Spiritual Poetics 11 (William Carlos Williams)." *The Allen Ginsberg Project*. The Allen Ginsberg Project, 11 Aug. 2001. Web. 11 Aug. 2016. <<http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.fr/2011/08/spiritual-poetics-11-william-carlos.html>>.

<sup>208</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews...*, op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>209</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, op. cit., p. 153.

This shows how influential this poem was to Allen Ginsberg, especially regarding his work toward a mindful poetry. It seems that Ginsberg praised Williams' practice of living the reality, instead of covering it with plenty of words like his poem "Sky Words" criticized ("sky is covered with words / Day is covered with words..."<sup>210</sup>). What is more is that Allen Ginsberg, when teaching about Williams at Naropa, added that he first read Williams' poem "with a background of sitting".<sup>211</sup> Still about Williams' "Thursday" and meditation practitioners, Allen Ginsberg declared:

[...] It occurred to me that Williams, by himself, had arrived at the same place where we all were, in terms of his self-awareness, and awareness of his physiological functionings and the awareness between body and mind [...]<sup>212</sup>

He also came to an interesting conclusion which goes in the sense of a projection of a Buddhist cosmology into Williams' poetry, and more globally of poetry being an art of "sudden flash of recognition".<sup>213</sup>

That is to say not that he's a Buddhist, but that Buddhism should be so natural, or that meditation could finally come down to just some basic place in nature [...].<sup>214</sup>

This sentence goes in the sense of Williams not being aware of his meditating process we mentioned earlier. But contrary to what Ginsberg said in the extract above, Williams clearly appeared as a Buddhist in his eyes, especially with "Thursday". Indeed, in a 1976 essay on Williams, Ginsberg wrote that "the poem "Thursday" shows that he really is a Buddhist".<sup>215</sup> But then again, Ginsberg insisted on the natural Buddhist path Williams, a "saint of perception",<sup>216</sup> took in order to do the same practice as Buddhists' in his poetry:

Williams had arrived at the same place that everybody else was studying and got there early and on his own.<sup>217</sup>

Moreover, Allen Ginsberg also used Williams' "Thursday" as a direct illustration, "much quoted by Buddhist poets"<sup>218</sup> and defined it as "the intersection between the mind of meditation and the Yankee practice of poetry after William James".<sup>219</sup> When mentioning William James, the famous philosopher, Allen Ginsberg referred to his notion of "solidity of specificity",<sup>220</sup> notion close to Williams' "minute particulars".

In a way, the natural Buddhism of Williams' poetry also answers the question about Allen

---

<sup>210</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1145.

<sup>211</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. "Meditation and Poetics - 5 (William Carlos Williams)." *The Allen Ginsberg Project*. The Allen Ginsberg Project, n.d. Web. 6 Aug. 2016. <<http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.fr/2014/11/meditation-and-poetics-5-william-carlos.html>>.

<sup>212</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. "Spiritual Poetics 11 (William Carlos Williams)." *op. cit.*

<sup>213</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. "Meditation and Poetics - 5 (William Carlos Williams)." *op. cit.*

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

<sup>216</sup> *Id.*

<sup>217</sup> *Id.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267-268.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Ginsberg re-arranging his prose into poetry, a practice we saw earlier. Allen Ginsberg concluded that it was because he did not intend to write poetry that was his best poetry (“things I didn't expect were important turned out to be the best poetry”<sup>221</sup>). But before arranging his prose into spontaneous poetry, it was necessary to write a spontaneous prose. In the method to do so, Allen Ginsberg quoted Williams three times: “measured pauses which are essentials of our speech”, “divisions of the *sounds* we hear” and “time and how to note it down”.<sup>222</sup> Allen Ginsberg, still about the re-arrangement of his journal prose into poetry, mentioned Williams' influence and the spiritual poetry he found in doing so:

Here Williams told me poems journal were poetry, henceforth everything written has added self-consciousness.<sup>223</sup>

In fact, Allen Ginsberg suspected Williams to have rearranged his prose into poetry for the poem “To Elsie”. Indeed, Ginsberg said to one of his students: “I bet you it was written in prose and he chopped it up”.<sup>224</sup> He added later that “everything is poetry [...] if you see it”,<sup>225</sup> linking Williams' practice of pure imagism with Buddhism:

He begins to *see* everything finally. And naturally it becomes poetry. Which is the point, again [...] on the iconography of Buddhism, where the upstairs guru is pointing out that if you *look*, and if you're attentive without resentment, every noise becomes punctuation in the big mantra and every little movement has a meaning of its own.<sup>226</sup>

It is then no curiosity when reading Allen Ginsberg about his spiritual teachers to find Williams among “Tibetan Lamas and Zen Masters”.<sup>227</sup> In Ginsberg's mind, Williams was mindful, conscious of the world, “in touch with human feelings”<sup>228</sup> and his poetry would reveal his ordinary vision. This is why Ginsberg said that “Williams' work as a poet is very similar to Zen Buddhist mindfulness practice”.<sup>229</sup> Allen Ginsberg wrote in his “Mind Writing Slogans” Williams' expression “clamp the mind down on objects”.<sup>230</sup> This is maybe why, just like William Blake and Walt Whitman, Williams is also an *igu* in the eponymous poem (“Williams of Paterson a dying American *igu*”<sup>231</sup>). More interesting, Williams appears in a poem with a meaningful title, “Why I Meditate”:

I sit because the Imagists breathed calmly in Rutherford and Manhattan<sup>232</sup>

This line refers to Williams because of the word “imagist” but also because Rutherford is Williams'

---

<sup>221</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 406.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>223</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 354.

<sup>224</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>226</sup> *Id.*

<sup>227</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>229</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

<sup>230</sup> Gach, Gary. *What Book!?*, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>231</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 851.

hometown. Furthermore, this verse conveys an important message with the verb “breathed” and with its Buddhist semantic charge: Williams embodies a Buddhist vision of poetry, connecting once again meditation and poetry. In the introduction of a class Allen Ginsberg taught at Naropa, he said about the context of the outbreak of modern poetry:

It was really the beginning of an almost-Buddhist introspection (or intra-spection, if you want) [...] <sup>233</sup>

This extract framed the class on Williams with Buddhist and contemplative characteristics. Williams' work on imagist poetry, close as we have seen to the immediate perception of thoughts as described in Buddhism, appears to be at the crossroad of Ginsberg's poetic aim and Ginsberg's Buddhism practice. This is the result of Ginsberg's subjective projection of Buddhist ideas into Williams' work. Indeed, though Williams' work can be linked with Buddhist meditation and aspiration, it does not express mysticism nor devotion, which play an important part in Buddhism. In Allen Ginsberg's “Improvisation in Beijing”, a poem which summarized the reasons why he wrote poetry, it is clear that Allen Ginsberg introduced Williams' ideas into Buddhism, and not the contrary, reinforcing the fact that Ginsberg's made a very personal reading of Williams:

I write poetry “First thought, best thought” always.

I write poetry because no ideas are comprehensible except as manifested  
in minute particulars: “No ideas but in things.”

I write poetry because the Tibetan Lama guru says, “Things are symbols  
of themselves.” <sup>234</sup>

First of all, we notice that the poem, and more particularly this extract, operates like a stream of consciousness, which represents the idea of the first line: “First thought, best thought”. Allen Ginsberg followed his inner poetic thoughts, writing them as they came. It is even more the case that according to the notes, this poem was “improvised from notes, transcribed from tape, lightly edited”. <sup>235</sup> In fact, in “Mind Writing Slogans”, “First thought, best thought” is the first advice, <sup>236</sup> the epigraph is Blake's quote “First Thought is Best in Art, Second in Other Matters” and there is a Shakespeare's quote, ending the circle of thoughts: “Every third thought shall be my grave”. <sup>237</sup> But what is important is that Williams' guiding axiom “no ideas but in things” is written between two Buddhist references, making Williams' quote a part of a bigger Buddhist poetic rule. This expression is to be found in “Mind Writing Slogans” <sup>238</sup> too. In “Improvisation in Beijing”, a curious verse also seems to be a reference to William Carlos Williams:

---

<sup>233</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. “Spiritual Poetics 11 (William Carlos Williams).” *op. cit.*

<sup>234</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 938.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1051.

<sup>236</sup> Gach, Gary. *What Book!?*..., *op. cit.*, p. 197.

<sup>237</sup> *Id.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

I write poetry because I sing when I'm lonesome.<sup>239</sup>

A parallel can be established with Williams' "Danse Russe" we encountered earlier. Indeed, a passage reads:

[...]

If I in my north room  
dance naked, grotesquely  
before my mirror  
waving my shirt round my head  
and singing softly to myself:  
"I am lonely, lonely.  
I was born to be lonely,  
I am best so!" [...]<sup>240</sup>

Both of the poets described their loneliness and reaction to it. Williams said about this poem that, "the artist, generally speaking, feels lonely" and is "usually in rebellion against the world".<sup>241</sup> What is interesting is that the poet confirmed his choice to describe the present reality without artifice. Indeed, he told the interviewer that this poem "merely records a fact".<sup>242</sup> It is a way to crystallize this precise moment and, for Allen Ginsberg, to write what he found in Williams' poetry: the "speech consciousness".<sup>243</sup> "It's a question of being conscious, as in WCW"<sup>244</sup> he would add in a letter about ordinary speech's rhythms. To some extent, this ordinary life also concerned the choice of subject for a poem, like "Turkey in the Straw"<sup>245</sup> which affected Ginsberg: "So Charles Olson and Williams were writing poems like that... like his wife sitting on a toilet".<sup>246</sup> It seems that what interested Allen Ginsberg when his active Buddhism and Williams' poetry are put side by side, is the acceptance of reality as it is. Williams' declared that "all poets have a tendency to dress up an ordinary person".<sup>247</sup> This characteristic seems to go along with what his editors called "the understanding and comprehension of a man who has seen more of life and death than the average person",<sup>248</sup> widening thus the prism through which reality was seen for Williams. According to Ginsberg, Williams was so good regarding his practice of poetry that he was able to use himself objectively as a subject for a poem. In a Naropa class, he declared about Williams' poem "Good

---

<sup>239</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 939.

<sup>240</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, *op. cit.*, p. 86-87.

<sup>241</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>242</sup> *Id.*

<sup>243</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed...*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>244</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>245</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume II...*, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>246</sup> Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>247</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews...*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Night ”.<sup>249</sup>

Then there's a point where, because he has become so objective, in that sense, that he is able to incorporate himself completely and use his self as the subject of the poem, without self-pity, even, almost, I think, in what we would call a tantric way.<sup>250</sup>

It is very interesting to notice that Allen Ginsberg compared Williams' poetry with Tantra. Tantra, usually associated with sexuality in westerners' minds, is firstly a way to be united with the divine and a teaching based on the complementarity of opposites, like male and female.<sup>251</sup> Therefore, Allen Ginsberg underlined the purity of Williams' inner perception of himself. That way, he implicitly described a deep and mystic mechanism that links perception and reality like two tangled opposites. As a matter of fact, Allen Ginsberg also read Williams' "Good Night" "like a zazen reverie".<sup>252</sup> The word zazen refers to a sitting practice of meditation. Therefore, when in the poem Williams wandered in his thoughts, it is for Allen Ginsberg a way to observe objectively not only details from his past, but also his present mind recalling details. In others words, the poet is observing both past events and his present thoughts about those past events. This new meaning given to "Good Night" is once more a Buddhist vision of Williams' poetry. Furthermore, we have seen that Williams influenced Allen Ginsberg on his measures, rhythms and sounds. Regarding Williams' focus on sonorities and on a pure American language, Allen Ginsberg also built a bridge between Williams and Eastern practice, including Buddhism:

[...] he had also then to become a yogi of listening to people talk, a yogi of paying attention to talk, to hear the rhythms in the talk [...]<sup>253</sup>

A yogi is someone who mastered the physiological elements of his body, in order to unify the body and the mind. Concerning Williams on sounds, it appears that Allen Ginsberg was pointing out Williams' control of his ear. This ability led toward a new poetry in which subject and language as well as style and content are in perfect unison.

---

<sup>249</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I...*, *op. cit.*, p. 85-86.

<sup>250</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. "Spiritual Poetics 11 (William Carlos Williams)." *op. cit.*

<sup>251</sup> Centre National De Ressources Textuelles Et Lexicales. "Tantra." CNRS, 2012. Web. 11 Aug. 2016.  
<<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/tantra>>.

<sup>252</sup> Ginsberg, Allen. "Spiritual Poetics 11 (William Carlos Williams)." *op. cit.*

<sup>253</sup> *Id.*

## Bibliography

(Chronological order)

### Works by Allen Ginsberg

Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: Grove, 1977. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed on the Tongue*. Ed. Donald Allen. Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox, 1980. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian Journals: Notebooks Diary Blank Pages Writings March 1962 - May 1963*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties, 1954-1958*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: HarperPerennial, 1996. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952-1995*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*. Ed. Michael Schumacher. London: Bloomsbury, 2001. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected Poems: 1947-1997*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems, 1937-1952*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2006. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript, and Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, With Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts, and Bibliography*. Ed. Barry Miles. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2008. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *Wait Till I'm Dead: Uncollected Poems*. Ed. Bill Morgan. UK: Penguin, 2016. Print. Modern Classics.

### **Works by William Carlos Williams**

Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. New York: New Directions, 1951. Print.

Williams, William Carlos, and John Connop. Thirlwall. *Many Loves and Other Plays*. New York: New Directions, 1961. Print.

Williams, William Carlos. *Interviews with William Carlos Williams: "speaking Straight Ahead"* Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin. New York: New Directions, 1976. Print.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939*. New York: New Directions, 1986. Print.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume II 1939-1962*. New York: New Directions, 1988. Print.

### **Works on The Beat Generation And Allen Ginsberg**

Tytell, John. *Naked Angels: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs*. New York, NY: Grove, 1991. Print.

Lardas, John. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2001. Print.

Miles, Barry. *Allen Ginsberg - A Biography*. London: Virgin, 2002. Print.

### **Other Works of Poetry**

Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *Blake Complete Writings; with Variant Readings*. London: Oxford UP, 1972. Print.

Gach, Gary. *What Book!?: Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax, 1998. Print.

### **Web**

Ginsberg, Allen. "Spiritual Poetics 11 (William Carlos Williams)." *The Allen Ginsberg Project*. The Allen Ginsberg Project, 11 Aug. 2001. Web. 11 Aug. 2016. <<http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.fr/2011/08/spiritual-poetics-11-william-carlos.html>>.

Ginsberg, Allen. "Meditation and Poetics - 5 (William Carlos Williams)." *The Allen Ginsberg Project*. The Allen Ginsberg Project, n.d. Web. 6 Aug. 2016. <<http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.fr/2014/11/meditation-and-poetics-5-william-carlos.html>>.

*Spotlight On Voices And Visions: William Carlos Williams*. Dir. Richard P. Rogers. Perf. Allen Ginsberg, Marjorie Perloff. *Voices and Visions Spotlight: William Carlos Williams*. Annenberg Foundation, n.d. Web. 21 July 2016. <<http://www.learner.org/catalog/extras/vvspot/Williams.html>>.

Berzin, Alexander, Dr. "Refuge: A Safe and Meaningful Direction in Life." *Studybuddhism.com*. Study Buddhism, n.d. Web. 6 Aug. 2016. <<http://studybuddhism.com/en/tibetan-buddhism/about-buddhism/buddha-s-basic-message/refuge-a-safe-and-meaningful-direction-in-life>>.

"Centre National De Ressources Textuelles Et Lexicales." *Centre National De Ressources Textuelles Et Lexicales*. CNRS, 2012. Web. 11 Aug. 2016. <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/>>.