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Visions, Symbols and Intertextuality: An Overview of William Blake's Influence on Allen Ginsberg

By Alexandre Ferrere

In a compilation of his personal journals, *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice*,¹ Allen Ginsberg recalled a particular event, which had a strong impact on his career and on his spiritual approach to life. In July 1948, that is to say eight years before the publication of *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg had a dynamic impression of unification and of human understanding through visions. He wrote in his journals:

[...] I realized that what I was seeing had been there all the time – indeed excited in me a recognition of that aspect of the imagination which is referred to as the eternal – longer than my own life, extending beyond my life and my former consciousness. I was staring at no human objects except the tops of buildings and at nature. Of the human objects, I remember that I understood in this one glance, their utility and significance.²

This experience of visionary awareness, which would evolve into a positive trauma, is linked to William Blake. Indeed, thanks to the precise readings lists he kept in his journals, we know that in May and June he wanted to read Blake's early poems, among others.³ It is interesting, by the way, to notice that it was William Burroughs who suggested to Ginsberg to read Blake, along with Spengler and Yeats' *A Vision*.⁴ But this July of 1948, the young Ginsberg reread a passage from a book of Blake's poetry, more precisely poems like "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sun-Flower". First, while masturbating and reading at the same time (a habit he confessed⁵), he gave an innocent look to the poem "Ah! Sun-Flower" and a visual and auditory vision occurred.⁶ Allen Ginsberg then "felt the Weight of Time",⁷ "spent a week after this living on the edge of a cliff of eternity"⁸ and identified with the sunflower.⁹ Then another deep sensation came a moment after, while reading the poem "The Sick Rose". He suddenly

¹ 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.

² *Ibid.*, p. 265.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 248 and p. 254.

⁴ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952-1995*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 208 and p. 368.

⁵ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. "Allen Ginsberg, An Interview." *The Paris Review* [New York] Spring 1966, N°37 ed., The Art of Poetry VIII sec.: 35.

⁶ Miles, Barry. *Allen Ginsberg - A Biography*. London: Virgin, 2002, p. 98-99.

⁷ Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 266.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 36.

"And suddenly I realized that the poem was talking about me"

Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 99.

"He suddenly had a deep understanding of the meaning of the poem and realised that he was the sunflower."

understood it in his own interpretation: He was the metaphorical “Sick Rose”¹⁰ and he was “hearing the doom of the whole universe” and its “inevitable beauty”. At last, the same day, he also identified with Lyca in William Blake's “The Little Girl Lost”.¹¹ Simultaneously with his Blake visions, he heard what he called a voice “tender and beautifully... ancient”,¹² that is to say Blake's voice in his room, while being illuminated alone physically. At that moment, the poet “saw into the depths of the universe”¹³. He described this spiritual event in “Psalm IV”¹⁴ in 1960:

[...] I lay broad waking on a fabulous couch in Harlem
having masturbated for no love, and read half-naked an open book of Blake
on my lap
Lo & behold! I was thoughtless and turned a page and gaze on the living
Sun-Flower
and heard a voice, it was Blake's, reciting in earthen measure:
[...]

And he would write about this event in many letters¹⁵ and poems, like in “One Day”, from his 1961 journals,¹⁶ emphasizing one particular element which reveals his ambivalence and doubt between reality and imagination:

[...]
I say I heard Blake's voice
There was something wrong with me
aural hallucination
[...]
I heard a physical voice
That was not an hallucination

¹⁰ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 38.

“The sick rose is myself, or self, or the living body.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

“I suddenly realized that Lyca was me, or Lyca was the self”

¹² Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 34-37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected Poems: 1947-1997*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006, p. 246.

¹⁵ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2008, p. 178.

“It was boys full of light and trains full of black music and the voice of William Blake roaring in my ear in Harlem.”

¹⁶ Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: Grove, 1977, p. 195.

Allen Ginsberg seemed to be afraid of his own visions, making them both tempting and scary at the same time. It also feels like he had to justify to himself his visions, maybe to avoid the threat of a psychological trouble like his mother had had. Indeed, in putting a certain contradiction into the poem, Allen Ginsberg reduced the blur between appearances and reality, between his inner illumination and the exterior world. Furthermore, there are clues about his fear of being considered crazy about his Blake visions. For example, Allen Ginsberg wrote a letter in 1962 to Nobel Prize Bertrand Russel about William Blake (Bertrand Russel having studied Blake too) and wrote more precisely about his visions. Interestingly, Bertrand Russel also experienced visions of William Blake, and Allen Ginsberg wrote about it at different moments in this letter:

What happened to you with Blake? Any further significance to the sensation that nearly made you faint?¹⁷

[...]

Would Blake say that Tiger be scared by bomb?¹⁸

[...]

What does Blake say to you?¹⁹

[...]

I hope you put your experience of Blake on verbal record in more detail, it may be helpful.²⁰

Those lines convey a fear of being abnormal. Allen Ginsberg is almost oppressive, asking many times about the effect the Blake visions had on Russell, as if to reassure himself with the desire of being normal (“helpful”), or at least reassured he was not the only one illuminated by Blake. And he also referred to the voice in his Blake visions three years later in “Kral Majales” (“[...] because I heard the voice of Blake in a vision, and repeat that voice.”²¹), going further in describing his literary aim regarding poetry and regarding those visions, twenty-five years after it occurred in his poem entitled “Who”:

From Great Consciousness vision Harlem 1948 buildings standing in Eternity.

I realized entire Universe was manifestation of One mind –

¹⁷ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, op. cit., p. 272.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Bertrand Russell admitted to Allen Ginsberg he fainted after hearing “Tiger Tiger”. This event is summarized in: Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*. Ed. Michael Schumacher. London: Bloomsbury, 2001, p. 185.

¹⁹ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, op. cit., p. 273.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²¹ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, op. cit., p. 362.

My teacher was William Blake – my life work Poesy,
transmitting that spontaneous awareness to Mankind.²²

During the same month of his Blake visions, Allen Ginsberg also composed a poem entitled “On Reading William Blake's “The Sick Rose””.²³ The mysterious poem of William Blake seems to refer to the human condition, poisoned by its own existence, like Albert Camus wrote in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: “le ver se trouve au cœur de l'homme”.²⁴ This point is corroborated by an entry in Ginsberg's journals, in January 1949:

Destiny itself is sick. The rose is sick. We must be doctors we are the sickness.²⁵

The definitive version of Allen Ginsberg's poem is also mysterious in its way:

What everlasting force confounded
In its being, like some human
Spirit shrunken in a bounded
Immortality, what Blossom
Gathers us inward, astounded?
Is this the sickness that is Doom?

Just like Blake emphasized the importance of the “rose” with a capital “R”,²⁶ Allen Ginsberg echoes to him with the accentuation of the capital “B” of “Blossom” (which is also a title of a poem of William Blake, “The Blossom”). Allen Ginsberg also chose to accentuate the word “Doom” too, making the idea of destruction as important as the idea of being born (“Blossom”), like the cycle of life. This particular spiritual link Allen Ginsberg maintained with Blake's poetry is confirmed by his numerous performances of Blake's poetry, like he did for “The Sick Rose”.²⁷ His performance, with a harmonium, sounds like a mantra²⁸ recitation,

²² *Ibid.*, p. 603.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁴ Camus, Albert. *Le Mythe De Sisyphe: Essai Sur L'absurde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1942, p. 17.

²⁵ Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 259.

²⁶ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *Blake Complete Writings; with Variant Readings*. London: Oxford UP, 1972, p. 213.

²⁷ Ginsberg, Allen, perf. *Holly Soul Jelly Roll*. Allen Ginsberg. Rhino Entertainment Company, 1998. CD.

It is interesting to notice that all the songs of the third CD begin with the expression “Ah!”, as a nod to William Blake's poem “Ah! Sun-Flower”.

²⁸ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

According to Allen Ginsberg, a mantra is “like a short magical formula prayer [...] which is an appeal to an aspect of the self”.

a spiritual experiment that is to be connected with his own metaphysical experience of Blake's poetry.²⁹

As a major event, ten years after his imprinted visions, Allen Ginsberg still referred to it in his poetry like in “Back on Times Square, Dreaming of Times Square”³⁰ or in “Igny”.³¹ Much later, in a 1975 course at the Narupa Institute,³² he would remember his 1948 visions, with a more concrete and mature look on it:

When I was twenty, I had an auditory hallucination of Blake's voice, which was just about like that [he played a recording of himself singing Blake's “The Nurse's Song ” before]. But it took me about twenty years to perfect it. So it was probably a hallucination of my own latent diaphragm vocalization. I was hearing my own voice, probably, as in a dream.

This idea of hearing his own voice is supported by his mention of “a conception of a voice of rock” he had after his visions.³³ In fact, he remembered having in mind this concept as a consequence of his Blake visions:

In 1948 I had a vision and heard William Blake's voice reciting [...]. After that experience I imagined a “Voice of Rock” as the sound of prophesy.³⁴

This “voice of rock” is also recorded in his journals:

Reminiscent also my thought that the conception of a “Voice of Rock” of poetry, my preoccupation in 1949, had been embodied finally in the absolute literal voice in the poetry 1955.³⁵

In Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, where Allen Ginsberg is named Carlo Marx, the author also related a “Voice of Rock” that Carlo was using, which underlines the fact that this voice was a major issue the poet must have talked about:

In these days Carlo had developed a tone of voice which he hoped sounded like what he called The Voice of Rock.³⁶

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

“I began setting Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* to music [because] they seemed the nearest thing to holy mantra or holy prayer that I could find in my own consciousness”.

³⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

“and dreamed of Blake's voice talking”

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

“he hears Blake's disembodied Voice recite the Sunflower in a room in Harlem”

³² Ginsberg, Allen. *Allen Ginsberg Class - The History of Poetry (Blake)*. Allen Ginsberg. Rec. 27 June 1975. 1975. *Archive.org*. Web. 20 Jan. 2016.

<https://archive.org/details/Allen_Ginsberg_class_The_history_of_poetry_part_14_June_1975_75P014>.

³³ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 36.

³⁴ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

³⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties, 1954-1958*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: HarperPerennial, 1996, p. 146.

³⁶ Kerouac, Jack, and Douglas Brinkley. *Road Novels, 1957-1960*. New York: Library of America, 2007, p. 116.

Allen Ginsberg even composed a whole poem entitled “The Voice of Rock”³⁷ and wrote about it in his *Indian Journals* (“When I was young you came with the / voice of tender rock”).³⁸ In the 1975 Naropa class mentioned above, he definitely accepted the place of Blake as his external mentor, who acted as his inner catalyst for mixing poetry and spirituality, but also as his inner mirror in which he could see what he really was, by the voice of himself/Blake. In 1966, he understood these visions in a more physiological way:

The interesting thing would be to know if certain combinations of words and rhythms actually had an electro-chemical reaction on the body, which could catalyze specific states of consciousness. I think that's what probably happened to me with Blake.³⁹

It is also interesting to notice that Ginsberg tried to obtain visionary hallucinations without Blake, which he mentioned in another poem, written in July 1948: “Vision 1948”.⁴⁰ The line “Dance, dance, spirit, spirit, dance!” is directly connected to a declaration he made in an interview where he summoned his vision in dancing and yelling “Dance! Dance! Dance! Dance! Spirit! Spirit! Dance!”.⁴¹ He added that “he felt like Faust” and “got all scared and quit”. The experimentation of a widened consciousness induced by self-provoked visions is negative without Blake. His Blake visions were always positive, as he recalled having another one in the same page, while reading Blake's “The Human Abstract”.⁴²

In “The Sick Rose” or in “Ah! Sun-Flower”, the reader has to decipher the metaphorical subject regarding its own condition; Ginsberg seems to be less evasive and gives advice, like in the last verse of “A Mad Gleam”, written six months after the Blake visions: “Follow the flower to the ground”.⁴³ The flower is obviously a reminiscence of “The Sick Rose” and of “Ah! Sun-Flower” (about which Allen Ginsberg and his father had discussions about its meaning⁴⁴). The latter also appears to be the main influence of a 1955 well-known poem of Allen Ginsberg: “Sunflower Sutra”.⁴⁵ The mention of his Blake visions is very clear:

– I rushed up enchanted – it was my first sunflower, memories of Blake – my visions –
Harlem

This sunflower now has a new meaning in Ginsberg's poem: like in Baudelaire's “Une Charogne”, Ginsberg is able to see the beauty where there is only urban trash. He writes the

³⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁸ Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian Journals: Notebooks Diary Blank Pages Writings March 1962 - May 1963*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 58.

³⁹ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 30-31.

⁴⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p; 16.

⁴¹ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 42.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁴ Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, p. 258.

⁴⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 146-147.

beauty out of the usual carcass, contrary to Blake's "The Sick Rose" in which the natural beauty is decaying. This poem is clearly a reminder of Blake's "The Echoing Green". In Ginsberg's poem, the poet and Jack Kerouac sit side by side, thinking "the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed [...] tired and wily".⁴⁶ They both look at a scrap heap looking like a sunflower. To the poet, this event brings back memories of Blake as well as a nostalgic gaze on "artifacts passing into the past".⁴⁷ In Blake's poem, an old man remembers his past while looking at children under the sun arising and descending. In both poems, the sun is a triggering figure. It offers a contemplative lightning in Blake's poem and a nostalgic "dead gray shadow"⁴⁸ in Ginsberg's, like two sides of the same coin. The place of the sunflower is once more of importance when it becomes metaphysical in "Poem Rocket",⁴⁹ just after the mention of the "one fold universe where Whitman was and Blake and Shelley was [...]":⁵⁰

Which way will the sunflower turn surrounded by millions of suns?

Allen Ginsberg chose the selective article "the" and not "a". It can then be referring to a specific sunflower, maybe the one of Blake's "Ah! Sun-Flower".⁵¹

Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun;
Seeking after that sweet golden clime,
Where the traveller's journey is done;

The main difference is that while in Blake's poems wealth and human prosperity are noticed with a global and almost social prism, Allen Ginsberg's poetry appears more introspective and more metaphysical.

It also appears that William Blake had a deep impact on Allen Ginsberg regarding his use of symbols and metaphors. For example, in William Blake's poems "The Little Girl Lost" and in "The Little Girl Found", the little girl is lost in a desert but a lion tells the parents where she is. This poem could act as a good metaphor for Ginsberg's state of mind at that time who felt lost at one point ("after seven years [...] I lost my curiosity. I lost my motive, my

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171-173.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁵¹ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 215.

reason.”⁵²). But there is also a lion in Ginsberg's poem “The Lion for Real”⁵³ in which he is seen as mentally ill by everyone and the lion here is ambiguous: it is dangerous and scary but also incredible, endearing and illuminating. Published in 1958, a decade after his visions, Allen Ginsberg played with the reader, between an accepted surrealism and a metaphysical metaphor, as it appears through the poem:

He didn't eat me, tho I regretted him starving in my presence
[...]
Lion that eats my mind now for a decade knowing only your
Hunger

The lion, and its opposite the lamb, have a specific meaning for Allen Ginsberg. In fact, as Jewish traditions require, Allen Ginsberg made a kaddish for his mother after she passed away. In this famous and melancholic poem, the “lion eats the soul – and the lamb, the soul, in us, alas, offering itself in sacrifice to change's fierce hunger”.⁵⁴ But whereas according to Samuel Foster Damon in his *Blake Dictionary*⁵⁵ Blake's lion is a protective figure of the lamb, in Allen Ginsberg's specific and enthusiast reading, the figures of the lion and of the lamb are respectively the evil and the good, the strength and the weakness in us, the Blakean Urizenic reason and Los imagination in us, in an almost schizophrenic manner. Furthermore, the lamb is a Blakean and traditional figure of innocence, as well as a figure of forgiveness and compassion in “*Auguries of Innocence*”:

The lamb misus'd breeds public strife,
And yet forgives the butcher's knife.⁵⁶

But Blake divided one characteristic into a subtle non-Manichean feature. For example, the lion is active and aggressive in “*A Memorable Fancy*” (“In a fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire raging around & melting the metals into living fluids”⁵⁷), sometimes it represents a Christian figure of the wrath of God (“The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God”⁵⁸) but finally, as Samuel Foster Damon analyzed, it becomes a protective figure of the lamb, thus of innocence, in Heaven,⁵⁹ as if it were expressing remorse or looking for redemption:

⁵² Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁵³ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 182-183.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁵⁵ Damon, S. Foster. *A Blake Dictionary, the Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, p. 242.

⁵⁶ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 431.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[...]
And there the lion's ruddy eyes
Shall flow with tears of gold,
And pitying the tender cries,
And walking around the fold,
Saying [...]
And now beside thee, bleating lamb,
I can lie down and sleep;

The lion is also represented in another of Allen Ginsberg's poems, "A Lion Met America", which is according to the poet "a little imitation of Stephen Crane's *In the desert / I saw a creature, naked, bestial*".⁶⁰

A Lion met America
On the crossroads in the desert
Two figures
Stared at each other.⁶¹

The lion is here like America: a symbol, a figure. But while America represents an ideal society, a Whitmanic America, the lion is more enigmatic. In fact, it seems that, just like in Blake's representations, the lion has more than one meaning:

The Lion bit the head off America
And loped off to the golden hills
That's all there is to say
About America except
That now she's
Lionshit all over the desert.⁶²

The lion appears like a prey and a threat for America, as it violently attacked the figure of America, and damaged the desert. In fact, there is here a certain yearning for a returning to a pure land, to the wild landscapes. To a certain extent, William Blake also had this desire, writing "O Earth, O Earth, return!" in the beginning of "Songs of Experience".⁶³ This could explain why Allen Ginsberg wrote "America" and not "the United-States", as if to underline the original virginity of the land.

⁶⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals Mid-fifties...*, *op. cit.*, p. 438.

⁶¹ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *Wait Till I'm Dead: Uncollected Poems*. Ed. Bill Morgan. UK: Penguin, 2016, p. 25.

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 210.

Another interesting point is that the national animal of England is a lion; metaphorically, this could mean that the pollution of the land of America is due to its invasion by foreign pioneers and their activities which took the “head off America”, which reminds what he wrote about what England's nation represented for America's soil and population:

Somebody lands and deceives the red man and steals his space to begin with. America never did belong to us.⁶⁴

Allen Ginsberg criticized men who are not really concerned by nature. He defended his point of view in a letter:

[...] each of us Americans pours more poison waste into fresh water and ocean than any thousand Asians. The world's ocean may be dead [...] if we have not stopped our war on Mother Nature and our wars on our own human kind.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, there is another interpretation we can make of the figure of the lion in the poem above. If we take the figure of the lion according to William Blake's symbolism, the lion can be a symbol of a “spiritual wrath”,⁶⁶ a form of trigger for a rebellion: all that is left in America is “Lionshit all over the desert”⁶⁷ (in his journals he wrote something quite similar: “America is covered with Lies”⁶⁸). This means that there are clues or hints of the lion's wrath, which can be a background for a spiritual change, to be finally aware of America as it is. In finding reasons and in building a little metaphoric story in this poem, Allen Ginsberg underlined that it is time to change, to be concerned again, to be fully aware of the environment's conditions, like he wrote in “Friday the Thirteenth”:

What prayer restores freshness to eastern meadows, soil to cindered acres,
hemlock to rusty hillside,
[...]
Earth pollution identical with Mind pollution, consciousness Pollution identical with filthy sky.⁶⁹

In that sense, the Lion is a wrath that can evolve into a positive reaction, an opposite direction to follow, a counterattack.

On the other hand, the figure of the lamb represents, as evoked earlier, ideas like innocence, compassion, sensitivity and delicateness, as in Blake's poems “The Lamb”⁷⁰ (“He

⁶⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. *Composed on the Tongue*. Ed. Donald Allen. Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox, 1980, p. 134.

⁶⁵ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

⁶⁶ Damon, S. Foster. *op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁶⁷ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁶⁸ Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early...*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁶⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 546-547.

⁷⁰ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 115.

is meek, and He is mild”) or “The Shepherd”⁷¹ (“For he hears the lamb's innocent call”). In Ginsberg's writings, especially in “Howl”, the figure of the lamb also represents the youth preyed on by Moloch, as he described in *Deliberate Prose*⁷²:

Part I, a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamb-like youths; Part II names the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb; Part III a litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory;

The lambs are the “best minds” in Ginsberg's “Howl”, very close to the figure of creation and imagination, destroyed by “mental consciousness”, the reason. In “Howl”, the figure of the lamb also represents the “middleclass” and the rebellious are therefore qualified as “crazy shepherds”.⁷³ The middleclass is then the oppressed herd, waiting to follow someone. This reminds of his short essay on freedom in America entitled *Poetry, Violence and the Trembling Lambs*.⁷⁴

In “Kaddish”, Allen Ginsberg states that the lion is an incomprehensible and lingering pain that is being aggressively infringing (“eats”) on his own human love and compassion (“the lamb”), reminding the First Noble Truth⁷⁵ as Ginsberg wrote, quoting Blake: “Man was made for joy and woe”.⁷⁶ This parallelism between Blake and Buddhism is often pointed out by Ginsberg himself. He even offered thoughts on the influence of Buddhism on Blake, especially for the fact that Blake made Urizen the embodiment and personification of reason:

Did Blake originate this brilliant idea? There may be ancient Buddhist correlatives.⁷⁷

It is also in “Kaddish” that the idea of being saved through imagination and poetry can be found. This idea is reflected in Blake's poetry in the conflict opposing Urizen, reason, and Los, imagination. Ginsberg observed that Urizen is according to Blake “unprolific” which he generalized in “he can't write poetry, he can't create anything, all he can do is criticize”.⁷⁸ In “Kaddish”, Ginsberg reminds his mother and uses his imagination to recreate his mother's

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁷² Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁷³ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

“Holy the vast lamb of the middleclass! Holy the / crazy shepherds of rebellion!”

⁷⁴ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁷⁵ The Four Noble Truths are the four “steps” taught by the Buddha:

1. The truth of suffering
2. The truth of the origin of suffering
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering

To see more: http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/beliefs/fournobletruths_1.shtml#h2

⁷⁶ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 282

childhood in detail and “get beyond appearances”.⁷⁹ In this perspective, he is writing his mother back to life with the help of Los, saving her from Urizen and oblivion, and giving her an imaginary body and an eternal soul. The climax of the comparison between Blakean figures of Urizen (reason, “mental consciousness”), Los (imagination, creation) and Ginsberg’s own mythology is reached in the beginning of the second part of “Howl”.⁸⁰

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up
their brains and imagination?

Moloch! [...]

Like Urizen “preyed” on Los, Moloch, “whose name is the Mind”,⁸¹ attacks the imagination of the lamb, of the American people. Like Allen Ginsberg stated, “the secrets of individual imagination [...] are not for sale to this consciousness”, a consciousness which is aggressively hitting the brains and by doing so destroying the other part of the self, the proper imagination, from “children” to “old men”.⁸²

Concerning Urizen, there is in Ginsberg’s personal journals a poem composed in 1949 untitled “Blake's Urizen”,⁸³ written in the same way he wrote “On Reading William Blake's 'The Sick Rose'”:

“Eternity shuddered when they saw
Man begetting his likeness
On his own divided image.”

I dream and dream.
I can face anything but reality
I can do anything but what is real
I can be any actor but myself:
I can write any poem but my own.
Boasting

Desks are dusty.
Money, money, work and worry.

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected..., op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁸¹ *Id.*

⁸² *Id.*

“Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!”

⁸³ Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 259.

The opening verses of the poem are taken from the second stanza of the sixth chapter of “Urizen”,⁸⁴ which shows how Ginsberg was steeped in Blake's mind. It is interesting to notice the association of “money” and “work” with “worry”. This very idea is to be linked with Ginsberg's figure of Moloch, close to the figure of Urizen as we have seen. In this poem, Allen Ginsberg seemed “divided” between what he wanted to do and what he could do. This cyclical and permanent tension between reality and imagination, between inner feeling and external representation is to be sprinkled all over Ginsberg's poetry in his later poems. This impression is described in one of his 1948 letters (written in July, the same month his visions occurred):⁸⁵

I remember that a long time ago you asked me when I was going to produce a poem in extension of myself, a work of art not of will. I am beginning to discover that possibility now. I have a good deal to say on the subject, but I do not possess the freedom to expatiate with any degrees of sincerity and clarity. [...] Still I have sufficient hints – almost visions, or I am finally on the right road.

Concerning the poem “Howl” and Blakean mythology, Ginsberg added that verses like “Buildings are judgment” have to be in fact compared with Blake's figure of Urizen, “creator of spiritual disorder and political chaos”.⁸⁶ Influenced both by the biblical tradition and the “cannibal dynamo” of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*,⁸⁷ the figure of Moloch itself is to be compared with Blake's Urizen according to James Breslin.⁸⁸ For that purpose, Allen Ginsberg even established and described parallels between the concept of Urizen (or as he would say “Your-Reason”⁸⁹) and his time. He explained:

It's very similar here in Urizen to the late 1970s problem the President had in deciding whether to employ the neutron bomb – whether to push forward on the vast nuclear plain or to withdraw.⁹⁰

This “Urizenic mentality”⁹¹ of modern times is both a re-contextualization and an actualization of Blake's idea of “hyper-rationalism”⁹² expressed in the figure of Urizen. By doing so, Allen Ginsberg created a valuable space warp, a fatal wormhole between ancient

⁸⁴ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁸⁵ Ginsberg, Allen, Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton, and Bill Morgan. *op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁸⁶ 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. 139.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁸⁸ Breslin, James E.B. "Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"" *From Modern to Contemporary American Poetry 1945-1965*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1986, p. 101.

⁸⁹ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁹¹ *Id.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 281.

prophecy and present time. In this approach of values by the prism of Blake, Allen Ginsberg is suggesting the importance of his lifelong model by the prophecy of the poet.

Furthermore, in his annotated versions of “Howl”, under the notes of his final draft, he put a quote from William Blake, “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”,⁹³ which is significant regarding Ginsberg's major works, and his abundance of ideas. He also admitted and openly assumed the use of Blakean specific vocabulary. This is the case for the expression “Moloch whose poverty is specter of genius”, in which “specter” have to be understood in Blake's sense,⁹⁴ that is to say the “reasoning power”.⁹⁵ In that case the usual poverty of citizens is due to the toxic and poisonous cleverness of the modern society, making poverty a condition *sine qua non* to keep Moloch healthy, making the bareness of millions the sustainable food of a few. Once more the similarities between Urizen, who embodies the hyper-reason, and Moloch the pitiless industrial complex, are to be underlined.

Allen Ginsberg, as we have seen earlier, wrote to Bertrand Russell about their shared Blake visions. But Allen Ginsberg even put, once more, Blake's mythology into the real world of his time. The letter to Bertrand Russel was written during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and they also talked about the approaching war; so Allen Ginsberg wrote with a Blakean symbolism in order to speak a common language with Russell:

Would Blake say that Tiger be scared by bomb?⁹⁶

Of course, the “Tiger” refers to Blake's poem “The Tyger”.⁹⁷ According to Samuel Foster Damon in *A Blake Dictionary*, the tiger represents the wrath and “when the Wrath breaks forth, it is Revolution”.⁹⁸ In fact, in another poem published posthumously entitled “For the Soul of the Planet is Wakening”, Allen Ginsberg added:

[...] & only
the prophetic priestly consciousness
of the bard [...]
[...] – can
steady our gaze into
the fiery eyes of the tygers of the

⁹³ Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁹⁵ Damon, S. Foster. *op. cit.*, p. 381.

⁹⁶ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁹⁷ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁹⁸ Damon, S. Foster. *op. cit.*, p. 413.

Wrath to come⁹⁹

It is interesting to notice that the word “tyger” is spelled just like in Blake's poem and that the word “Wrath” is the only one of the poem to have a capital W, along with “Wakening” and “Imperial Satanic”.¹⁰⁰ The tone of the poem is revolutionary, asking to take the situation seriously and actively, toward a new world. Here again, Allen Ginsberg shows indirectly who influenced him in this direction.

Finally, Allen Ginsberg also referred to another symbol from Blake's poetry: Albion. Albion is a “common poetical name for England”,¹⁰¹ according to Samuel Foster Damon. But in Blake's poems, Albion is also “the father of all mankind”.¹⁰² Allen Ginsberg used the name of Albion to describe England in “Wales Visitation” (“but what seen by one man in a vale in Albion”,¹⁰³ “All Albion one.”¹⁰⁴) and in “After Wales Visitacione July 29 1967” (“All Albion is One”¹⁰⁵). The mention of “Albion is one” refers to William Blake's mythology in which the fallen Albion is divided into the Four Zoas (Urizen, Tharmas, Luvah/Orc and Urthona/Los) and so Allen Ginsberg must be trying to convey a feeling of unity finally retrieved with “Albion is one”. In fact, both of Ginsberg's poems were written the same day, with LSD.¹⁰⁶ The use of Albion in both poems is not so anecdotal when we focus on the references to William Blake, as Allen Ginsberg referred to him in both poems with different meanings. In *Wales Visitation*, he wrote that he “heard in Blake's old ear”¹⁰⁷ and in “After Wales Visitacione July 29 1967”, he wrote that he “entered Wales in Visitaciones nameless bard on her hill thru Blake's eye”.¹⁰⁸ There is also indirect references, concerning especially a Blakean symbolism we encountered earlier: Ginsberg refers to the lamb three times in “Wales Visitation”¹⁰⁹ and once in “After Wales Visitacione July 29 1967”.¹¹⁰ In both poems, the

⁹⁹ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁰ *Id.*

¹⁰¹ Damon, S. Foster. *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰² *Id.*

¹⁰³ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 490

¹⁰⁵ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221

““Wales Visitation” is considered to be one of Ginsberg's greatest poem of the period. This is a continuation of that poem written at the same time and under the effects of LSD.”

¹⁰⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

¹⁰⁸ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

“the lamb on the tree-nooked hillside”

And

“and lifted the lambs to hold still”

And in *Ibid.*, p. 489

“& look in the eyes of the branded lambs that stare”

¹¹⁰ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 86.

figure of the lamb is on the one hand the concrete animal in the landscapes, and on the other hand a bucolic figure of a link between Men and Nature. This is why in both poems Allen Ginsberg heard the “sounds of Aleph and Aum”.¹¹¹ Aleph is the first letter of the Hebraic alphabet and Aum the primordial sound in religions like Buddhism. This means that Allen Ginsberg, in the company of William Blake, experienced a feeling of unity with earth and nature. Moreover, in both poems, Allen Ginsberg wrote about the lambs in the fields of Wales. This sounds like a nod to William Blake's “Jerusalem”:

[...]

And was the holy Lamb of God

On England's pleasant pastures seen?¹¹²

Allen Ginsberg also referred to Albion and *Jerusalem* in another poem entitled “Liverpool Muse”, written in 1965. This poem is about young people dancing to music and there are two epigraphs before the poem:

Albion Albion your children dance again

Jerusalem's rock established in the basements of satanic mills¹¹³

The first verse refers to a Blake's painting entitled *The Dance of Albion (or Glad Day)* and in Blake's poems, one of Albion's daughters, Gwendolen, “dances naked to the timbrel of war”.¹¹⁴ But Allen Ginsberg created a new version of the children of Albion for the children also refer to the youth of England. The Blakean symbol of Albion is consciously chosen by Allen Ginsberg, for the inscription of the Blake's painting reads:

Albion rose from where he labour'd at the Mill with Slaves:

Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death.¹¹⁵

According to Bill Morgan, the “Sink” Allen Ginsberg wrote about in the poem is a “Liverpool Jazz Club”.¹¹⁶ So there is this lexical field of dancing, and also the close link we can establish between “Sink” in Ginsberg's poem and “Mill” in Blake's inscription. The parallel Allen Ginsberg made between both situations goes further for he also wrote about the “Jerusalem's rock” in the “basements of satanic mills”. This rock can be a reminder of the Rock of Ages

“& driven like lambs thru the / meadows of Wye”

¹¹¹ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 460.

And

Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹¹² Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 480.

¹¹³ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹¹⁴ Damon, S. Foster. *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹¹⁵ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 160.

¹¹⁶ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 220.

which is also known as “the Rock of Albion”,¹¹⁷ where “Jesus lays the sleeping Albion”.¹¹⁸ This rock seems to symbolize the new birth of a complete Man. The “satanic mills” Allen Ginsberg referred to are also the “Satanic Mills” of William Blake's “Jerusalem”:

And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?¹¹⁹

Once contextualized in the modern era, the references Allen Ginsberg made to William Blake are significant: youth is the new hope, Blake's ideal born again. This is maybe why Allen Ginsberg wrote at the end of the poem:

The Circle is
Complete.¹²⁰

The circle is returning to the beginning, from Blake's poetry in the England of the eighteenth century to Ginsberg's nod of 1965. The poem is therefore pointing in the past, to finally come back toward a new era and a new world, one more time.

William Blake had such a deep impact on Allen Ginsberg that he also used a quote from William Blake's poem “Morning”¹²¹ as a title for his own poetry collection, *Gates of Wrath*.¹²² He also used the first stanza of “Morning” as an epigraph for the same book. In fact, in many poems and interviews William Blake appears as a poet Allen Ginsberg paid tribute to, as a poet who had always haunted Allen Ginsberg's poetry. For example, in the poem “May Days 1988”, a nostalgic and melancholic description of a normal day, Blake's “Tyger” appears in a bookcase,¹²³ as to show the habit of having William Blake in his everyday life. Allen Ginsberg later wrote in “After Lalou”:

When I was young Blake
tipped me off
Other teachers followed:
Better prepare for death
Don't get entangled with

¹¹⁷ Damon, S. Foster. *op. cit.*, p. 350.

¹¹⁸ *Id.*

¹¹⁹ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 481.

¹²⁰ Ginsberg, Allen, and Rachel Zucker. *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹²¹ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 421.

¹²² Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 809.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 980.

possessions¹²⁴

In this extract, William Blake officiates as one of Allen Ginsberg's teachers. One could have thought that William Blake only influenced Allen Ginsberg's poetry, but Blake (among others including Walt Whitman, or William Carlos Williams) is a kind of metaphysical teacher who goes beyond teaching sheer poetry. The poetry of Blake transcends time and space, offers a new mythology and a new consciousness of the universe. This point is a central notion in Ginsberg's poetry; the echo he found in Blake influenced his poetical commitment but also his perception of poetry. He said in a 1966 interview that with Blake he understood “that poetry had a definite effect, it wasn't just pretty”¹²⁵ and that it was in a way a “time machine”.¹²⁶ In a 1949 letter to John Clellon Holmes (author of *Go*), he added:

[...] the more literal the mind [...] the more prophetic it will be. I was surprised when I realized that Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Dante, etc. were in greater or lesser senses literal. Who takes them literally? Who takes the core of the Bible literally? Who even takes Freud literally? Who takes the world literally?¹²⁷

In this passage, he underlined the concrete substance of poetry, that it has to be confronted to reality. Therefore, he admits that he read Blake almost religiously, like a text showing the path. In a way, Allen Ginsberg practiced hermeneutics on Blake, trying to find tangible applications to his poetry while at the same time being influenced by it. He also clearly admits his devotion to poetry and Blake as his main influence many times. Furthermore, the perception of the uniqueness of the universe (like mentioned earlier) is a Buddhist idea, which means either he read about it before his visions or he went into Buddhism because of this mutual point of view. They also shared the prophetic inner view of poetry, “transmitting that spontaneous awareness to Mankind”. In fact, in the same letter to John Clellon Holmes he wrote about Blake's poems that “they are capable of summoning up in me, the sensation of eternity”.¹²⁸ Seventeen years later he wrote with a scholarly perspective:

Blake was also a social critic and rebel etc. but the ROOT of his work as of ours has been in exploration of modes of consciousness.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1019.

¹²⁵ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 24-25.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹²⁷ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹²⁸ *Id.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

This complex and spiritual relationship is almost a transcendental paternity: Ginsberg is a man of vision and Blake “the invisible father of English visions” in “Wichita Vortex Sutra”¹³⁰. Allen Ginsberg even depicts it as a deliberate choice in “Ego Confession”:¹³¹

I want to be known as the most brilliant man in America
[...] Who saw Blake and abandoned God

The last line is rather ambiguous. It is difficult to determine whether it means that Blake is the reason Allen Ginsberg turned away from God, or if it is only a concomitant or a subsequent fact. In both cases, Blake represents here a spiritual and personal abstraction like God (which would be the reason why he wrote “saw” and not “read”).

This atemporal harmony with Blake is at the heart of Ginsberg's writing. For example, by July 1948, that is to say the month the young Allen Ginsberg had visions of Blake, he composed a poem entitled “The Eye Altering Alters All”.¹³² The title of the poem is taken, as he said, from a “Buddhist” line of Blake's poem, “The Mental Traveller”, which is, according to him in one of his 1976 classes, “one of the strangest poems ever written”.¹³³

As we have seen, he mentioned his visions in “Howl”, writing about himself as one of the protagonists of the poem, “hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-Light tragedy among the scholars of war”.¹³⁴ Besides, in “The Footnotes to Howl”,¹³⁵ there are fifteen repetitions of the word “Holy” (“Exuberance is Beauty” would say Blake¹³⁶) that begins the poem in which Allen Ginsberg claimed that “Everything is holy!”. This repetition can remind the reader of Blake's “Vision of The Last Judgment” in which he wrote:

“[...] I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty’”¹³⁷

This repetition, especially when performed, seems to work like a fanatic liturgical trance whose aim is to frame the world, his world, into a word: “holy”. But there are many more indirect references to Blake's poetry in these “footnotes”. For example, the very idea of the

¹³⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 631.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹³³ Ginsberg, Allen. *Allen Ginsberg Class - Spontaneous Poetics 22 [Part 2 of 2]*. Allen Ginsberg. Rec. 4 August 1976. 1976. *Naropa University Archives*. Web. 20 Jan. 2016.

<<http://cdm16621.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p.16621coll1/id/1114/rec/1>>.

¹³⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹³⁶ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 152.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 617.

verse “The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!”¹³⁸ is very close to “The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands and feet Proportion” from Blake's “Proverbs of Hell”;¹³⁹ Ginsberg's “Everybody's holy”¹⁴⁰ is in the same vein of Blake's “For everything that lives is holy” in “The Song Of Enitharmon Over Los”.¹⁴¹ Moreover, the poetic rhythm and the meaning of some verses of “Howl” are somewhat close to Blake's, like the passage “Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!” in “Howl”¹⁴² and “Selfish! Vain! Eternal bane!” in Blake's “Earth's Answer”.¹⁴³ According to Ginsberg himself, the passage “Everyday is in eternity”¹⁴⁴ has to be read regarding Blake's “Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour”,¹⁴⁵ and the verse “Who dig Los Angeles IS Los Angeles” with Blake's “They became what they beheld”.¹⁴⁶ In a more textual axis, Allen Ginsberg made a modern use of the literary argument at the beginning of his 1977 “Contest of Bards”,¹⁴⁷ just like William Blake did in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

Concerning his private life, and as an enthusiastic reader of Blake, Allen Ginsberg composed a 1973 poem entitled “What I'd like to Do” in which he scholarly wanted to:

Go to San Marino see Blake's vision of Moloch, go to Manchester see Moloch
 Visit Blake's works all over World West, study prophetic Books interpret
 Blake unify Vision¹⁴⁸

He knew where the illustrations made by William Blake were: the Huntington Library is in San Marino and the Whitworth Art Gallery is in Manchester and both possess works by Blake, including his drawing of the Moloch of Milton's *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*.¹⁴⁹ He also expressed this desire in a letter to his father:

Reading Blake again. I'd like to go spend a month in London at British museum reading his original editions, they had colored pictures.¹⁵⁰

¹³⁸ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹³⁹ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 152.

¹⁴⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁴¹ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 289.

¹⁴² Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁴³ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹⁴⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁴⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: Original...*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

¹⁴⁶ *Id.*

¹⁴⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 673-687.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 610

¹⁴⁹ Blake, William. *Sullen Moloch: Milton's Hymn 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'* Digital image. *The University of Manchester*. The Whitworth Art Gallery, n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2016.

<<http://gallerysearch.ds.man.ac.uk/Detail/85>>.

¹⁵⁰ Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, p. 201.

At the end of the poem “What I'd Like to Do”, he put himself in the continuity of William Blake's poetry and spirituality, wanting to:

Compose last choirs of Innocence & Experience, set music to tongues of
Rossetti Mss. Orchestrate Jerusalem's quatrain – ¹⁵¹

This desire to “set music to tongues” is very important in Allen Ginsberg's life. In fact, in a 1982 letter he wrote about “some projects I want to finish before I die”¹⁵² and among the many projects, Allen Ginsberg wrote about putting Blake's poems into music:

6) Complete “Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake tuned by Allen Ginsberg”. I've completed music and satisfactory recording of about 30 of the 45 poems in this series. [...] What is available has found favor with Blake scholars and high school and college teachers and has been used as teaching aid in introducing students to Blake.¹⁵³

As biographer Barry Miles wrote, quoting Allen Ginsberg, it appears that setting music to Blake's poems was “a lovely extension” of the “mantra practice” of Allen Ginsberg.¹⁵⁴ He talked about how he came to put Blake's poems into music in an interview and it seems that it was a self-evident fact that began with the confusion between two Blake's poems, one about Lafayette and “The Grey Monk”:

This tune came with it, for the first time and then I had confused it with another poem called “The Grey Monk” [...]. So I got 'em mixed up and began hummin a tune in my heart on the bus. I got home I started working with a harmonium and making a tune for both poems [...]¹⁵⁵

He also sang in his classes on the history of poetry at the Naropa Institute, like in June 1975.¹⁵⁶ In this recording, he even stated that his aim in singing literally the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was to “restore some of the vocalization to them by singing them, because they're a lot easier to understand sung”.¹⁵⁷ He added, regarding the poem “Jerusalem”, that it was important to sing it “because it has a certain natural music in it”.¹⁵⁸ He also declared that this was the way Blake used to compose his poems: “He'd go to his friends' houses and chant unaccompanied”,¹⁵⁹ writing “a cappella”.¹⁶⁰ The place of music was very important in Ginsberg's poetry, and regarding Blake, Allen Ginsberg was so immersed in

¹⁵¹ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 610.

¹⁵² Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

¹⁵³ *Id.*

¹⁵⁴ Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 419.

¹⁵⁵ Colbert, Alison, and Allen Ginsberg. "A Talk with Allen Ginsberg." *Partisan Review* 38.3 (1971): 289-309, p. 289-290.

¹⁵⁶ Ginsberg, Allen. *Allen Ginsberg Class - The History of Poetry...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁷ *Id.*

¹⁵⁸ Ginsberg, Allen. *Allen Ginsberg Class - Spontaneous Poetics 22 [Part 2 of 2] ...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁹ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

and

Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, p. 296.

¹⁶⁰ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *Deliberate...*, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

this project that he worked on the songs “over and over again”.¹⁶¹ Allen Ginsberg was desirous to also mix his own poetry with music and he wrote many poems to be sung, which were published along with scores like “A Western Ballad”,¹⁶² “Father Death Blues”¹⁶³ or “Gospel Nobel Truths”.¹⁶⁴ In fact, another reference to William Blake's poetry is to be found in the politically engaged “The Ballad of the Skeletons”,¹⁶⁵ written in 1995 and set into music:

Said the Gnostic Skeleton
The Human Form's Divine
Said the Moral Majority skeleton
No it's not its mine

The Moral Majority was an American association, engaged both in Christian rights and politics (republican party). In this passage, it is opposed to Gnosticism which is an intellectual tradition based on the belief that everybody has a divine soul and that we are all condemned to live in a material world. Therefore, it appears that on the one hand the Gnostic Skeleton praised the notion of divine included in everyone and on the other hand, the reader can guess that the Moral Majority Skeleton was only interested into subjugating people for its cause. There is also a famous version of this poem with Paul McCartney,¹⁶⁶ and in fact Allen Ginsberg remembered having a “drunken night talking about pot and William Blake with the Beatles” in a 1965 letter.¹⁶⁷ He also used the expression “human form's divine” with a specific sense in an interview:¹⁶⁸

Anyway a whole series of India holy men pointed back to the body – getting in the body rather than getting out of the human form. But living in and inhabiting the human form. Which then goes back to Blake again, the human form divine.

This expression, “the human form's divine”, is very similar to the one used by Blake in “The Divine Image” (“Prays to the human form divine”¹⁶⁹) and in “A Divine Image” (“Terror the human form divine”¹⁷⁰). In that sense, the “Gnostic Skeleton” is Blake, who was interested in many religions and philosophy. Ginsberg was indeed well aware of Blake's interests in

¹⁶¹ Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 419.

¹⁶² Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 20-21.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 662-663

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 648-649

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1091.

¹⁶⁶ GoldmarkGallery. "Allen Ginsberg and Paul McCartney Playing "A Ballad of American Skeletons"" *YouTube*. YouTube, 13 Aug. 2012. Web. 01 July 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr5Y4XQO7xQ>>.

¹⁶⁷ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

¹⁶⁸ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 49.

¹⁶⁹ Blake, William, and Geoffrey Keynes. *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

esotericism; for that matter, in a 1970 poem entitled “Ecologue”,¹⁷¹ William Blake appears between “Kabbalah, Gnostic Fragments, Mahanirvana & Hevajra Tantras, Boheme” and “Zohar, Gita & Soma Veda”. Blake is part of Ginsberg's vast spiritual cosmology, not only as an influence for writing poetry, but as a real and solid spiritual connection. Later, Blake reappears between the poet Kabir and Allen Ginsberg himself.¹⁷² As a matter of fact, he already made this connection between Blake and Oriental writings in 1966,¹⁷³ linking Blake's ideas to the Hindu Bhakti. He even talked about how he was advised to take Blake as his guru in Brindaban¹⁷⁴ and wrote about it in a poem (“Blake my Guru”¹⁷⁵) and in a letter to his father (“they sd Blake was my Guru”¹⁷⁶). This accepted and claimed spiritual generation shows how Ginsberg puts himself between the Orient and the Occident, as well as between poetry and spirituality. But to some extent, he had to split from the visions of Blake he had, as he declared in an interview:¹⁷⁷

[...] to attain the depths of consciousness that I was seeking when I was talking about the Blake vision, that in order to attain it I had to cut myself off from the Blake vision and renounce it. Otherwise I'd be hung up on a memory of an experience. Which is not the actual awareness of now, now.

This renouncement to Blake is also discussed by Barry Miles in his biography of Allen Ginsberg.¹⁷⁸ In his *Indian Journals*, some elements also show how strongly he was linked to those Blake visions:

When I was young you came with the
voice of tender rock.

[...]

Contact. Dear Blake, come back.¹⁷⁹

In this poem, he imagined Blake's “windows” in his “cottage”¹⁸⁰ and mentioned “ghat's sick rose”¹⁸¹ which is of course a direct reference to William Blake's poem “The Sick Rose”. At the end, in a state that sounds like desperation he wrote:

Dear Blake

¹⁷¹ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 550.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 561.

¹⁷³ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 33.

¹⁷⁴ Colbert, Alison, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, p. 292.

¹⁷⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian...*, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹⁷⁶ Ginsberg, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁷⁷ Clark, Thomas, and Allen Ginsberg. *op. cit.*, 50-51.

¹⁷⁸ Miles, Barry. *op. cit.*, p. 322.

¹⁷⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian...*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁸⁰ *Id.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59

Ahch!¹⁸²

When trying peyote in Peru, Allen Ginsberg even wrote to William S. Burroughs that he did not know who to turn to, something new or his “own serpent-self’s memory of merry visions of Blake”.¹⁸³ It is not a simple affection or emotional attachment to those visions, as the other alternative is “death”.¹⁸⁴

Regarding more precisely the idea of not being hung up “on a memory of an experience” like Allen Ginsberg declared in the interview mentioned above, and particularly this idea of a split between actual moment and memories, one can see the paradoxical link between Blake and Buddhism. When someone reaches a certain state of direct consciousness in a meditation session, he or she can be tempted to reach this state again, making the act of meditating a vain quest to find a memory or a copy of former perceptions, which is not a real state of awareness. But this does not mean that Allen Ginsberg switched from Blake to Buddhism. And this does not mean that Allen Ginsberg totally cut the link with Blake, even during this period of renouncement. Many times, he referred to the life-mask of William Blake and of his eyes closed¹⁸⁵ or noticed the complete works of Blake “unread” in a bookshelf.¹⁸⁶ In fact, the admiration he had toward William Blake haunted him until the very end of his life. The 30th March 1997 (he died the 5th April 1997) he wrote his last poem, the melancholic “Things I’ll Not Do (Nostalgia)”.¹⁸⁷ In this poem, he enumerated the things he loved or wanted to do while he knew at that moment that he was dying. By the end of the poem, he recalled his classes at the Naropa Institute:

No more sweet summers with lovers, teaching Blake at Naropa, [...]

Among the various and numerous things he taught at the Naropa Institute, he chose to write this particular memory of Blake, as a last nod to Blake a week before dying. In a 1979 letter he wrote about those classes on Blake:

I am here half year this year teaching Blake's prophetic book line by line (now finished with

¹⁸² *Id.*

¹⁸³ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

¹⁸⁴ *Id.*

¹⁸⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian...*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

“Blake life-mask photo on a nail on the wall between the balcony doors”

Ibid., p. 165

“Blake on the wall last week / eyes closed [...]

Ibid., p. 172

“Blake Mask tacked on wall”

Ibid., p. 174

“& see a picture of Blake”

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209

¹⁸⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1160.

Lambeth books to 1795 and beginning on Urizen – a project that will take 2 years to complete with students here).¹⁸⁸

Teaching poetry was very important for Allen Ginsberg, like he wrote, just before illustrating his words by quoting William Blake's poem “The Schoolboy”:

Poetry is the most sensitive speech we know [...]. Attack and insult and ban poetry to our youth and you dumb their hearts, defend and praise and teach poetry to our youths and you lead their own natural hearts to utterance.¹⁸⁹

In this perspective, Blake is the poet who started to teach Ginsberg how to find his way through poetry, and who was then taught and transmitted by Allen Ginsberg himself. Blake is a central poet in Ginsberg's life, from his sensational visions of 1948 to his nostalgic final poem in 1997, written by someone who is thankful for all those memories, but saddened by his consciousness of death.

¹⁸⁸ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

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