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A Derridian Exploration into Allen Ginsberg's Archive(s)

By Alexandre Ferrere

This paper was first delivered in December 2018, at the international conference "A Corpus in Fever: Archival Impulses in Theory, Literature and the Arts" (Athens, Greece—National and Kapodistrian University of Athens).

The importance of the archive regarding literary studies has been emphasized by the field of genetic criticism, emerging in the 1970s, as a way to explore the genealogy of a text, and, as Pierre De Biasi put it, to study it as a product of "hard work, historicity and desire".¹ The aim is to reveal and to display a visible part of the creative process; Arlette Farge summarized it with the expression "to touch reality".² But this active part played by the archive is also a challenge to the very idea of "final text". In that sense, Pierre de Biasi wrote that "one of the main interests of diving into the past of a text is to introduce the critic to a mobile universe where nothing is ever final"³. Of course, this idea of a mobile universe is at the heart of Allen Ginsberg's poetry, and it must be added that Allen Ginsberg had a specific relationship with his archives: he hired his own archivist and he also published several books of journals and letters in his lifetime, including a genealogical study of his famous poem "Howl". But in addition to the preservation of the historical value of his archives, his interest was also motivated by his very method of composition. This paper offers then to analyze a few examples of Allen Ginsberg's poetry in the light of his archives, as a way to explore his acts of composition with a genealogical and psychological focus. Jacques Derrida, another "rebel" in the literary world, will play the role of a guide in this exploration: his theories and definitions will shed light on the mechanisms at work in Allen Ginsberg's poetry.

¹ Biasi, Pierre-Marc de. *Génétiq ue Des Textes*. CNRS, 2011, p. 62. My Translation.

² Farge, Arlette. *Le Goût de l'Archive*. Points, 1989, p. 18. My translation.

³ Biasi, Pierre-Marc de... op. cit., p. 186. My translation.

Composing the Archive

Two processes highlighted by Jacques Derrida will be helpful to understand Allen Ginsberg's methods of composition. The first one, coined by Derrida in his book *La carte postale*, is the process of "cartepostalisation"—which, as Professor Charles Ramond wrote, is the fate of every text.⁴ "Cartepostalisation", from the French "carte postale" ("postcard" in English), means that a text has always more than one specific addressee: as soon as a text is written, its readership cannot be delimited and thus does not depend on the writer's intention. The process of "cartepostalisation" also implies that a text always includes in itself a potential of fragmentation from its original context, which Derrida called "partition",⁵ as well as of transplantation in a different context (not very far from Gilles Deleuze's notions of deterritorialization and reterritorialization). In other words, this means that a text can always be divided, extracted and even rearranged.

As a complementary notion to "cartepostalisation", Jacques Derrida also coined the expression "adestination", from the word "destination" and the negative prefix "a", meaning that a text has no fixed destination, in the same way that it has no fixed readership. This means that a postcard, just like any other text, "is always opened towards literature"⁶ as Derrida wrote. In fact, both "cartepostalisation" and "adestination" are inherent to every text, as Professor Charles Ramond analyzed, adding that "the role of language is to "transport" signification".⁷

It is particularly interesting to focus on these processes when it comes to Allen Ginsberg's way of composing poetry. His two-part poem entitled "Siesta in Xbalba and Return to the States" can be here a revealing example. This poem was composed between 1954 and 1955, at a time when Allen Ginsberg, depressed, was travelling from New-York to Mexico. During this trip, the poet recorded in a notebook every image, every dream, and every description he could, a habit he took as early as 1937 when he was eleven years old. His journals of that time include much more than hints, traces or drafts of the future poem:

⁴ Ramond, Charles. *Derrida, une philosophie de l'écriture*. Paris: Ellipses, 2018, p. 189.

⁵ Derrida, Jacques. *La carte postale : De Socrate à Freud et au-delà*. Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1980, p. 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79. My translation.

⁷ Ramond, Charles. *Derrida, une philosophie...* op. cit., p. 146. My translation.

Journal entries (1954)	Siesta in Xbalba and Return to the States (1956)
<p><i>Chichén Itzà—Soliloquy</i></p> <p>Army shoes, a kerosene lamp on dust strewn floor where ant wends its nitely ritual way—off with my straw hat—cigarette moment ago on my hand on knee in darkness seemed a million miles away.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>Great stone portals, entablatures of language gone, poetry gone, spirit gone, bas reliefs of unknown perceptions: in front of me a minute ago I saw death's head half a thousand years old—and have seen cocks a thousand years old grown over with moss and batshit in a dripping vaulted room of stone, stuck in walls (like C.'s plasticine cock at Columbia dormitory).</p> <p>High air of silence over the thin layer of nightforest that stretches over to the horizon which as I turn my head is circular.</p> <p>[...]</p>	<p>I can see the moon, Moving over the edge of the night forest and follow its destination through the clear dimensions of the sky from end to end of the dark circular horizon.</p> <p>High dim stone portals, entablatures of illegible scripture, bas-reliefs of unknown perceptions: and now the flicker of my lamp and smell of kerosene on dust- strewn floor where ant wends its nightly ritual way toward great faces worn down by rain.</p> <p>In front of me a deathhead half a thousand years old —and have seen cocks a thousand old grown over with moss and batshit stuck out of the wall in a dripping vaulted house of rock—</p>
<p>But Deathhead in front of me on portal's here and thinks its way thru centuries—reveal to me, eyeseer, the thought of the same night I sit in sat in once and many times before by artisan other than I or master once whose work's fineness has been worn down by time and only the crude skull figurements left with its wornaway plumes and indecipherable headdresses of intellect and thought, and clothes of style obliterated to a mess of notches—</p>	<p>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 until his image of ghostly change appeared unalterable— but now his fine thought's vaguer than my dream of him: and only the crude skull figurement's gaunt insensible glare is left with broken plumes of sensation, headdresses of indecipherable intellect [...]</p>

As can be observed from a comparative reading between his journals and the published poem, Allen Ginsberg composed in rearranging entire prose paragraphs into poetry. In this example, this process sometimes involves semantic changes. Pierre de Biasi, observing these semantic changes in Mallarmé's poetry, explained that "in poetry [...] the demanding nature of the signifier usually takes the place of the signified".⁸ Allen Ginsberg's journals are then the visible part of the mechanism at work in the invisible space between his archives and his poems, and to use Willa Cather's words, Allen Ginsberg's journals are "the other side of the rug". The genealogy of Allen Ginsberg's practice, rearranging his journals into poetry, from "the private to the public"⁹ as Derrida wrote, show that it comes from a piece of advice William Carlos Williams gave him, suggesting the "poetic possibilities of his journals prose".¹⁰ As a matter of fact, William Carlos Williams himself included a long letter written by Allen Ginsberg in his famous work entitled *Paterson*,¹¹ in another literal example of "cartepostalisation".

This means that Allen Ginsberg consciously created his own archives to use them as a raw poetic material. In that sense, his journals are not completely early drafts but fully understood acts of composition in themselves, and as he wrote himself, he used to "milk his notebooks for poems".¹² His journals are therefore a complex laboratory where a new poetry is composed, implying also meta-reflections as he usually wrote about rearranging passages noted just above these reflections. Following Derrida's theory, Allen Ginsberg was in fact writing to himself, just like any other person writing a journal, but he was also writing to another person: the poet, a future self who will then have to rearrange, to fragment and to transplant these entries in a poem.

In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida often reflected on the archive and "its relationship to the future".¹³ This temporality, along with the notions of "cartepostalisation" and "adestation", help to reconsider Allen Ginsberg's journals as a place of transition, opening words from the past to a future poetry. Moreover, one could add that Allen Ginsberg's way of composing challenged the poetic meaning in the same way ready-mades did: the content is as important as the poetic gesture which rearranged it. This rearranging, this fragmenting and transplanting, this partially controlled "cartepostalisation" are then poetic gestures on their own, especially in

⁸ Biasi, Pierre-Marc de... op. cit., p. 206. My translation.

⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Diacritics, Vol 25, No 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 9-63, p. 10.

¹⁰ Miles, Barry. *Allen Ginsberg: A Biography*. Virgin, 2001, p.87.

¹¹ Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. New Directions, 1963, p. 173-175.

¹² Ginsberg, Allen, and Gordon Ball. *Journal Mid-Fifties: 1954-1958*. HarperPerennial, 1996, p. xiii.

¹³ Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever...* op. cit., p. 17.

the sense that Allen Ginsberg was writing without knowing what would constitute a poem in the future. His archive is therefore a conscious pool of images, of poetic potentiality, which somewhat tries to be what Derrida called a “total journal”,¹⁴ that is the result of a “desire” to write impossible “complete chronicles”.¹⁵ Derrida also wrote about this specific space located between the work and the before-work, between the act of composition and the idea of composition, explaining that a “raw material” does not have “the same status as first draft”.¹⁶ Allen Ginsberg’s archive reaches then the status of first draft only retroactively, once the poet chose the elements he needed and once he rearranged them. And, of course, the “adestation” still occurs with the publication of Allen Ginsberg’s journals and letters, making them accessible to a new readership, in a new context.

Challenging the Archive

After “Howl”, the most famous poem written by Allen Ginsberg is “Kaddish”, a long poem published in 1961. This very intimate poem is the result of an overwhelming personal history, as it is centered on the poet’s mother, Naomi Ginsberg, who died in 1956, after decades of mental illness and internments. The title of this poem comes from the Jewish tradition, the kaddish being a prayer for the dead—prayer which was denied to Naomi Ginsberg. As a consequence, this biographical and melancholic poem can be read as a personal kaddish which aims to make up for the one Naomi Ginsberg could not have a few years earlier. This poem crystalizes all the fear and pain Allen Ginsberg felt throughout his childhood and early adulthood and, of course, his journals are full of references which Allen Ginsberg reused in his poem. To that extent, Allen Ginsberg’s journals display the same pool of poetic potentiality as in “Siesta in Xbalba”, but they also display evolutions of ideas through real drafts this time, especially in what could be called the pre-kaddish poems:

¹⁴ Peeters, Benoît. *Derrida*. Paris, Flammarion, 2010, p. 359.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques, and Brahic, Beverley Bie, translator. *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive*. Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 27.

Schumann's Kinderscenen (journals Sept. 1955-March 1957)

Farewell

Sweet
Dream

Farewell

Sweet
Memory

Farewell

Sweet
Mother

Kaddish (draft of part IV, Nov. 1957)

Farewell

With long black shoe

Farewell

Smoking corsets & ribs of still

Farewell

Communist party & broken string

O mother

Farewell

[...]

**With your fear of grandma of grandma
crawling on the horizon**

**Elegy for Mama (journals, March 1957-
July 1958)**

Her mouth is **a radio**

Paranoia grandma

Climbing up the outside

Apartment walls at night (l.6)

**Song for Naomi (journals March 1957-July
1958)**

**4 Big Sticks, 4 Big Sticks, 4 Big stick in my
back**

Wires in my head the ceiling is **a radio**

FDR is **my mother-in-law** **Crawling in the
window**

I saw the Key, the sun in bars, sun is the key.

**Kaddish (composed between 1957-1959, published
in 1961)**

Collected Poems, p. 219

‘Allen, you don’t understand—it’s—ever since those
3 big sticks up my back—they did something to me in
Hospital, they poisoned me, they want to see me
dead—**3 big sticks, 3 big sticks**—

“The Bitch! Old **Grandma!** Last week I saw her,
dressed in pants like

An old man, with a sack on her back, **climbing up the
brick side of the apartment**

Collected Poems, p. 232

2 days after her death I got her letter—

Strange Prophecies anew! She wrote—‘**The key is
in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the
window—I have the key**—Get married Allen don’t
take drugs—**the key is in the bars**, in the sunlight in the
window.

Love,
your mother’

Which is Naomi—

Collected Poems, p. 234

O mother

farewell

with a long black shoe

farewell

with Communist Party and a broken stocking

This is an example of what Derrida wrote about the Hélène Cixous' archives: "what really happens in the book happens in the before-work".¹⁷ The essence of the poem is already here, years before and waiting to spread. What is interesting is that, in the same way that Derrida thought a word from a draft as a "little bit more than a word" ("a word that is a theoretical matrix"),¹⁸ Allen Ginsberg mentioned multiple times in his journals the word and the desire to write a kaddish for his mother, and as early as 1955 he started to write poems, keeping some passages in the final version like the "farewell" litany (in green), which evolved as he kept writing through the years.

In fact, "Kaddish" is filled and fueled with memories of direct speeches, which were not all kept on record, except in the poet's memory. Thus, a question arises regarding the notion of archive and Allen Ginsberg's poetry: are those remembered speeches real archives and can they be trusted? It seems that this question leads this study towards a psychological interpretation of the archive, as a work of intimate and secret traces. In this case, this poem acts like a catharsis and a gesture of acceptance, but the impulse and its authenticity will remain secret forever. To that extent, what Jacques Derrida wrote in his analysis of the notion of archive is thoughtful and revealing: "here we are kept at a respectful distance, within the magnetic field, but forever at arm's length from one must call the secret of literature".¹⁹

This uncertainty is also conveyed by Allen Ginsberg himself, like in a passage mentioning a letter written by his mother, received two days after her death. Indeed, Allen Ginsberg quoted in his poem passages of this specific letter, but this letter does not mention any "key in the window", but it does contain mentions of marriage and drugs (in yellow):

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁸ Derrida, Jacques, and Ferrer, Daniel. « *Entre le corps écrivant et l'écriture...* », *entretien avec Daniel Ferrer*. Genesis, 2001, pp. 59-72, p. 70. My translation.

¹⁹ Derrida, Jacques, and Brahic, Beverley Bie, translator. *Geneses...* op. cit., p. 19.

Naomi Ginsberg to Allen Ginsberg (extract, n.d., postmarked June 11, 1956)

I hope this reaches you.
I sent one before which, maybe, they didn't send out!
[...]
You know you have to get a job to **get married**.
I wish you did have a good job. [...]
I wish you get married. Do you like farming?
Its as good a job as any.
I hope you behave well. Don't go in for too much drink and other things that are not good for you. [...]
I do hope you get a good job so you can get a girl to **get married**. Eugene's wife is beautiful.
As for myself, **I still have the wire on my head**.
The doctors know about it. **They are still cutting the flesh & bone**. **They are giving me teeth-ache**. [...]
I hope you are not taking any drugs as suggested by your poetry. That would hurt me.
Don't go in for ridiculous things.

With love & good news,
(mother) Naomi

Kaddish (published 1961)

Collected Poems, p.218

What came is gone forever every time—
That's good! That leaves it open for no regret—no fear radiators, lacklove, **torture** even **toothache** in the end—

Collected Poems, p. 232

2 days after her death I got her letter—
Strange Prophecies anew! She wrote—'The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window—I have the key—**Get married Allen don't take drugs**—the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window.

Love,
your mother'

which is Naomi—

Collected Poems, p. 233

only to have known the weird ideas of Hitler at the door, **the wires in her head**, the three big sticks

In other words, Naomi's letter does not display the same sentences as recalled by Ginsberg in this poem or in former drafts. Allen Ginsberg himself admitted being "confused" about these differences, adding that "there may be another letter" (maybe the one mentioned at the beginning of Naomi's last letter),²⁰ which reminds what Derrida wrote in *Archive Fever*: "the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory."²¹

Jacques Derrida analyzed this tension between the archive and one's relationship to it, writing that "the structure of the archive is spectral. [...] neither present nor absent"²² and Allen Ginsberg's use of memories and intimate materials reveals a strong desire to go back in the past. In other words, this other example of "cartpostalisation" implies a specific reading

²⁰ Ginsberg, Allen, and Le Pellec, Yves. *A Collage of Voices: An Interview with Allen Ginsberg*. Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines, 1989, N° 39, pp. 91-111, p. 205-106.

²¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever*... op. cit., p. 14.

²² Ibid., p. 54.

experience, as to let the archive speak by itself, whether it be a physical or a psychological archive. Derrida wrote about “a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement”,²³ which is one of the aims of “Kaddish”. Moreover, as evoked earlier, a part of the genealogy of this poem exists in the secret of the poet’s memories of experiences, and as Derrida put it, “of the secret itself, there can be no archive” because “the secret is the very ash of the archive”.²⁴ A part of the archive of “Kaddish” is then non-visible, in the sense that it is not entirely invisible as there are still traces: the reader can only see the negative of this photograph, and the more one reads the poem, the more the archive reveals its evanescence. Memories then form a discreet aura as defined by Walter Benjamin, that is “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be”²⁵; to that extent, the archive of “Kaddish” is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

As mentioned before, Derrida saw the archive as “a movement of the promise and of the future”,²⁶ and indeed, in Allen Ginsberg’s poetry, there is a multiplicity of backward and forward movements, between the re-creation of a lost past, retrievable only through physical and psychological archives, and the creation, settled in the future and still unknown in the archive though already present. Derrida called the fact that a text had to wander without any specific destination “destinerrance”, a concept close to “adestination”—a combination of “destination” and “errance” (the French for “wandering”). To some extent, one could speak of “auto-destinerrance” in Allen Ginsberg’s poetry, as he was one of his archive addressees without knowing it yet in the case of “Kaddish”. For Derrida, the addressee is also the one who gives meaning to a text; Allen Ginsberg is then both the person voicing the message and the addressee. The most striking example of these ideas in Allen Ginsberg’s archive is a poem written in his journals between 1945 and 1946, when he was twenty years old. This poem, entitled “To my Mother: an Homage”, has been composed ten years before the death of his mother and some lines will be transplanted into the final “Kaddish”. Here again, these first words are the archives of moments which bore in themselves an unknown future and unknown poetry:

²³ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn. In *The Work of art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 19-55, p. 23.

²⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever...* op. cit., p. 24.

To my Mother: an Homage (journals, 1945-1946)	Kaddish (composed between 1957-1959, published in 1961)
<p>Do you remember maidenhood? The picture Taken in the summer camp, you sitting Carefree on the grass, of summer singing, A mandolin upon your knees, a garland Wound of dandelion in your hair? I can't forget your tragic, early singing, Russian, Jewish, indeterminate Of origin or sorrow... how Stenka Razin Hurlled his bride into the restive sea... You, sitting near the trees, and singing sadly... <i>Last night the nightingale woke me</i> <i>Last night when all was still</i> <i>It sang in the golden moonlight</i> <i>Beyond the wintry hill...</i> Till from your head the dying flowers fell</p>	<p>Collected Poems, p. 222 Lou took photo of her sitting crossleg on the grass—her long hair wound with flowers—smiling—playing lullabies on mandolin—poison ivy smoke in leftwing summer camps and me in infancy saw trees—</p> <p>Collected Poems, p. 225 —my Mother again to cook &—play the piano—sing at mandolin—Lung Stew, & Stenka Razin, & the communist line on the war with Finland</p> <p>Collected Poems, p. 229 “[...] —I cooked for my two children—I played the mandolin—” Last night the nightingale woke me / Last night when all was still / It sang in the golden moonlight / From on the wintry hill. She did.</p> <p>Collected Poems, p. 231 No revolution might destroy that maidenhood</p> <p>Collected Poems, p. 231 O Russian faced, woman on grass, your long black hair is crowned with flowers, the mandolin is on your knees—</p> <p>Collected Poems, p. 235 With your Death full of Flowers</p>

Derrida also developed the notion of iterability to intellectualize the capacity of a sign to be repeatable in another context. According to Professor Steinmetz, iterability, as a consequence, “deploys the reign of an interpretative process”²⁷, challenging then its original “readability”,²⁸ and this complementary process also seems to be at work in Allen Ginsberg’s archive.

A Derridian exploration into Allen Ginsberg’s archives is then an endless exploration, but Derrida understood the necessary tension inherent in the archive. This exploration is dual: though some parts must stay invisible, this exploration is genealogic; it is also psychological as

²⁷ Steinmetz, Rudy. *Les Styles de Derrida*. Bruxelles : De Coeck-Wesmael, 1994, p. 233.

²⁸ Id.

behind the words, the archive sometimes takes the appearance of an unattainable wound, and for Derrida to “run after” it would be to search “for the archive right where it slips away”²⁹. As can be seen in these examples, archives are always echoing in Allen Ginsberg’s published poetry and one of the causes is that they know no solid separation. On the contrary, the dynamism of the poetic gesture acts beyond the visible structure, that is the “structural secret” of poetry, as wrote Charles Ramond. Two last comments must be made as a conclusion to this short study. First, Derrida’s theories can explain how a context is never definitive in Allen Ginsberg’s use of the archive, shedding light on a process that is an act of creation and (re)appropriation. Secondly, the tension between the archive and the poem, in a final gesture of deconstruction, is somewhat neutralized by Derrida. And this is not done in the resolution of an antagonistic hierarchy, but in a systemic enrichment which has more to do with reciprocity than temporality.

²⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever...* op. cit., p. 57.

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