

Dharma Lion: A biography of Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997). Michael Schumacher. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. Review by K. D. Kragen

It was while reading this biography of Allen Ginsberg that I concluded that a Xian literary group is needed not only to coalesce my own aesthetic views but to develop and nurture a community of Xian artists to stand up to the constant truth and beauty bashing. For me, Allen Ginsberg is a perfect *foil* against which my own Xian aesthetics might attain greater clarity. Given this relation between Ginsberg and myself, as well as the fact that Ginsberg in many ways epitomizes the secular mystic intellectual art anarchist, I have found a study of his poetry & life a wonderful counterpoint to considering the place of the Xian artist in the post-Christian, neo-pagan world.

“To a large degree,” writes Michael Schumacher, “[Ginsberg’s early thoughts about poetry and art] reflected Naomi Ginsberg’s influence upon her son. Naomi’s madness, for all the damage and sorrow that it inflicted upon the family, also contained, in its own strange way, many of the aesthetic qualities that Allen wanted to include in his poetry. Naomi was spontaneity personified; she had always possessed an enormous appetite for beauty, sensuality, and sensation. Allen’s interest in New York’s bohemian lifestyle, his friendships and conversations with Kerouac, Carr, and Burroughs, and his study of marginal characters had given him a greater sympathy for his mother.

“This sympathy was further tempered by his recognition of his own differences from what was considered to be stable society. In the 1940s, homosexuality and madness were both regarded in the minds of the American public as aberrations, and homosexuality was actually considered to be a type of madness by a large portion of the public. As far as Allen could determine, he would never fit in, at least not totally, nor did he want to; he hoped to find a way of distinguishing himself while meeting his own needs” (p. 69).

Ginsberg was a self-avowed aesthetic anarchist. He dedicated his life to find truth, but giving up on any objective source for it he turned inward. His anarchist conviction required him to tear down all the structures of the past—social, philosophical, religious, and aesthetic—and to seek to make a new reality, a new universe, to reinvent out of his own mind the wheel of life. From the beginning of his poetic career, such barriers as that between art and pornography also required complete destruction (he was just being consistent).

Discussing two Ginsberg poems (“Drive All Blames into One” and “Please Master”) Schumacher notes, “The exhibitionistic qualities to these and other Ginsberg poems, shocking to many readers because of their graphic frankness and revolting to critics who ascribed to a mannered approach to poetry, held several important functions for Ginsberg. As a poet, Ginsberg remained consistent in his belief that erotic—or even pornographic—art was both valuable and liberating; by being willing to expose one’s innermost secret longings, fantasies, and practices, the artist was opening an avenue in which others could feel comfortable with their own similar feelings. The artist was therefore extending an invitation for people to accept their own bodies and minds. Ginsberg was especially attuned to this idea in the 1960s and 1970s when, as one of the leaders in the gay liberation movement, he was confronted with the gamut of ideas of how sexual freedom might be politically achieved” (p. 76).

It is one thing to create one’s own destiny, it’s quite another to create an entire universe in which to live it. Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi, was caught in such a private universe, but her madness was at least to some degree not entirely of her own choosing. Ginsberg, on the other hand, *chose* his madness. Ginsberg’s friend, Jack Kerouac, spent his life trying “to find a balance between his love for ‘the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved’ and his other yearnings to live a more conventional American life, such as the one exemplified by his parents” (p. 82).

Ginsberg likewise saw the choice to be between (1) that idealized life-style typified by “the mad ones,” the social outcasts, those noble aesthetic philosophic savages on the cliff-edge of existence, and (2) the “conventional lifestyle” of mid-twentieth century white America. He would not entertain any other possibilities, not from his Jewish background, not from his studies in Medieval Christian mysticism, not from any quarter outside his own psyche. (What a devastating sadness, what an empty life horror Allen Ginsberg chose for himself!) It was while studying the poetry of William Blake (missing entirely the desperate Christian piety of William Blake) that Ginsberg swam headlong into the mystic pit of his own mind, mistaking this inner sanctum for the “Supreme Reality,” the “New Vision.”

John Clellon Holme first spoke of the Beat generation in “This Is the Beat Generation” (November 16, 1948): “More than weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself.” Ginsberg was one of the original “Beaten ones.” Once, after visiting his mother in the State Hospital psycho ward, he cried out, “The horror, the horror”:

Naomi! Naomi! is this what has come to you
now—what I’ll be when I’m mad as your hair in
the 90’s of the future! When I scream on the roofs of
synagogues bearded toward Heaven? [p.151]

About this same time Ginsberg wrote a telling synopsis of his life up to the age of 26 what more can be said (p. 144):

A Novel

At 14 I was an introvert, an atheist, a Communist and a Jew, and I still wanted to be president of the United States.

At 19, being no longer a virgin, I was a cocksucker, and believed in a supreme reality, an anarchist, a hipster totally apolitical Reichian; I wanted to be a great poet instead.

At 22 I was a hallucinating mystic believing in the City of God and I wanted to be a saint.

At 23, a year later, I was already a criminal, a despairing sinner, a dope fiend; I wanted to get to reality.

At 24, after being a jailbird, a schizoid screwball in the bughouse, I got laid, girls, I was being psychoanalyzed.

At 26, I am shy, go out with girls, I write poetry, I am a freelance literary agent and a registered democrat [*sic*]; I want to find a job. Who cares?

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