Widened Awareness:
Allen Ginsberg’s Poetic Transmission of a Blakean Inflected Esoteric Dream-Insight

C. J. Pevateaux
Rice University, Department of Religious Studies, Houston, Texas, USA
cjp@post.harvard.edu

Abstract
Elargissement du champ de conscience : la transmission poétique, par Allen Ginsberg, d’une vue onirique ésotérique à désinence blakienne.

Allen Ginsberg, le poète américain qui est devenu une icône de la « Beat Generation », faisait remonter son inspiration poétique à d’anciennes sources ésotériques en passant par William Blake. Selon Ginsberg, la poésie de Blake a catalysé en lui un certain type de conscience véhiculant la vue onirique gnostique de la nature illusoire du monde matériel. Accessible par la poésie, les drogues et le chant, la « conscience cosmico-démonique » blakienne et ésotérique de Ginsberg impliquait une dilatation du champ de conscience portée jusqu’à la plus grande plénitude potentielle de celle-ci. Cultiver cette conscience chez lui-même et chez d’autres, telle fut la quête poursuivie par Ginsberg toute sa vie durant.

Keywords
Ginsberg, Allen; Blake, William; gnosticism; poetry; chant; consciousness

Introduction

I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations
Allen Ginsberg, ‘America’

born in Newark come into Eternity in New York crying again
in Peru for human Tongue to psalm the Unspeakable
Allen Ginsberg, ‘Magic Psalm’

When asked in May of 1968 about the central contribution of the hippie movement, Allen Ginsberg, the American poet who became an icon for the “Beat generation”, said, ‘love is not what was ultimately proposed, it was a widening of awareness’.1 To Ginsberg, this message of widened awareness

1 Ginsberg, Spontaneous Mind, 93.
spread by the hippies and the Beat generation was not something new. ‘In no sense’, said Ginsberg in the same ’68 interview with William Buckley, ‘have they said anything new, except that they’ve simply brought forward and out front, both like politically and sociologically and consciousness and avant-garde artwise, the old gnostic tradition which had been somewhat suppressed by the Whore of Babylon, that is to say, the organized, rigidified, militarily crusading Church’. This esoteric “gnostic”2 tradition Ginsberg traced ‘back from Blake through Paracelsus and Plotinus and Jacob Boehme all the way back to Pythagoras, and back from, back to in those days, the Eleusinian mysteries and the Bacchic mysteries to the mystery cults, and back through the mystery cults to the Near East, back to the source of it all, you come to the same sources’.3

Tracing his own mystical experiences back to William Blake, Ginsberg claimed the English poet as source of his own poetic powers. To Ginsberg, Blake was ‘an eighteenth-century vehicle for Western gnostic tradition that historically you can trace back to the same roots, same cities, same geography, same mushrooms, that give rise to the Aryan, Zoroastrian, Manichaen pre-Hindu yogas’.4 For Ginsberg, the basic insight of this tradition is that altered states of consciousness reduce the pretensions of normal consciousness to nothing. This awareness ‘that all apparent sensory feelings, thoughts and impressions are illusory’, however, was repressed, according to Ginsberg, by the organized church after Constantine.5 ‘So, in other words’, said Ginsberg, what happened in the fourth century is that the basic Indian understanding that the apparent physical universe is only apparent, and really is a dream-structure in which we’re trapped, because attached to a thing that’s real—that was extirpated from Christ-doctrine, and also the books wiped out and burned, so that it took people like Paracelsus, Bohme, Blake, Shelley, Coleridge, Emerson, to perpetuate that memory out of their own intuitions and glimmerings—and also checking

2 Determining the extent to which Ginsberg’s insights align with any historical “Gnosticism” is beyond the scope of this paper. Indeed, locating a definitive “Gnosticism” from which to assess divergence or consonance seems at best problematic in today’s scholarly milieu. As Karen King, my former teacher at Harvard, argues (following Ortner), ‘the study of ancient cultural hybridity should focus less on identifying which materials are combined in syncretic amalgamation than on the discourses, processes, and practices by which people make sense of their lives in contexts of ancient pluralism, the governing regimes and institutions that further and constrain such practices, and the power relations that are at stake’ (What is Gnosticism?, 231). In a similar vein, I am interested in how Ginsberg uses what he perceives as his “gnostic” inheritance to help make sense of his own experiences and poetics.
3 Ginsberg, Spontaneous Mind, 263.
4 Ginsberg, Spontaneous Mind, 263.
5 Ginsberg, Spontaneous Mind, 266.