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Party Line: Allen Ginsberg and political expression in *Death & fame*

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Mention the name Allen Ginsberg and it is hard to resist the urge to drift back into the psychedelic-colored world of the 1960s where free love, drugs and the Beat Poets influenced the literary landscape. Ginsberg came into his own as part of the Beat generation. It was during this time that he helped give voice to the “youthful, dissatisfied, rebellious” energy “that would soon coalesce into the” political “culture and practices of the New Left” (Lee 365). The publication of *Howl*, not only expressed the feelings of a generation but also became, according to literary critics, one of the most influential and important works of the twentieth century. While no one can deny the power of Ginsberg’s work during the ‘60s and ‘70s, his influence on society and politics did not end there. Ginsberg continued teaching, writing and publishing up until his death on April 5, 1997.

Critics and scholars of Ginsberg have largely ignored these later works, and his ability to write the political poetically. *Death & fame*, his last book of poetry, published after his death, offers valuable insights into Ginsberg’s ability to address political topics in a way that melds his ideological beliefs with the poetic and transforms them into something that informs and enlightens. Ginsberg claimed, “That there is no real distinction between political and unpolitical poetry, and I would advise a poet to avoid politics and get to what is his or her most deeply felt perception or impulse” (Rothschild). However, a close reading of five poems from this book, “Peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” “God,” “New Stanzas for *Amazing Grace*,” “Homeless Complaynt,” and “C’mon Pigs of Western Civilization Eat More Grease” will illustrate that despite Ginsberg’s objections to the contrary, much of his later work falls squarely in the political ring, and that he was a master of the genre.

Despite Ginsberg’s claim that he doesn’t “believe in so-called political poetry” (Brown) *Death & fame*, a collection of poems written between 1993 and 1997, addresses themes that include sympathy for the working class, the corrupt nature of political leaders, a critique of consumerism and the necessity for social justice (Lee 379). These themes are not new and have been addressed by Ginsberg in many other works; however, they are given new life by the likes of Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms, Ronald Reagan and the “party of the Elephant” who embody all that Ginsberg dislikes and become targets for ridicule. This should by no means be read as an endorsement of any political party. Ginsberg’s political views did not fit easily or neatly into any predefined categories.

While his feet and heart were planted firmly in the left of the political spectrum, any politician or political group that failed to address the concerns of the masses received his scorn, including those who may have been otherwise sympathetic to Ginsberg’s causes. For example, he criticizes the left for adopting right-wing tactics and failing to address the rise of fundamentalism, saying that, “The left fumbled the ball by allowing the right-wing style of close-minded aggression to be part of their policy. It’s a fuck up.” Ginsberg goes on to criticize the leadership of both sides for merely engaging in anger

politics, failing to lead and causing the masses to be left “wondering why no permanent change has occurred” (Brown). Ginsberg addresses many of these issues in “Peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina”.

This poem is an excellent example of Ginsberg’s ability to craft political poetry. The poem is effective in part because of its rhetorical nature. Rhetoric can be defined as “the art of persuasion, the use or demonstration of verbal eloquence” (Austin-Smith). The poem is effective as both a literary work and a political statement for a number of reasons. As a poem, one of the main reasons it is so effective is its use of strong imagery. Ginsberg takes us down the streets to view the devastation inflicted upon the Muslim population. We see the “corpses [stinking] in wet fields”, the fires smoldering in back alleys, the broken doors of the cinema, the windowless school and the brokenwalled hut (4-5). Each of these images helps to convey to the reader not only the hopelessness of Bosnia-Herzegovina but also the horror of the civil war. The repetition of the question “Who owns” each of the various buildings named in the poem helps Ginsberg to create a sense of rhythm that moves the reader through the poem. Finally, Ginsberg alludes to various peacemakers of the past and present, as if invoking their memory will bring an end to the fighting and all sides will come to understand each other.

Even this act though expresses a certain amount of futility in the situation. As each is named, they are given military ranks or political titles. Mother Teresa becomes “General Mother Teresa,” the Dalai Lama becomes “Emperor Dalai Lama XIV,” and Pope John Paul II, becomes an army chaplain (1-4). The act of renaming and assigning titles to these individuals belies the complex and troubled history of the Baltic region and the ethnic strife that plagues it and questions whether the involvement of any of these individuals or the peacemakers from the United Nations will be enough to end the bloodshed. Indeed, the repetition of the question who owns the houses, stores, land, etc. hints at the heart of the matter. Ginsberg is implying that it is this question, the question of ownership and the economic opportunities that come with it, that will need to be settled if there is to be peace. The fact that there is no answer given in the poem indicates that this approach to the problem is at best a short term solution and will not provide long-term peace or stability for the area, or address the ethnic and religious strife hinted at in the poem through his reference to Moslem Bosnians.

This poem also fits Ginsberg’s idea of what poetry should do. He believed a poet should write “his mind. And like everybody else, his mind is concerned with sex, dope, and everyday living, politics included” (Rothschild). By doing this, the poet, according to Ginsberg, would express a reality far more real than that given by the media. He believed that “private experience is different from the way it’s recorded in the newspapers and on television. We have our own worlds, and then there is the pseudo-event of newspapers. As Pound says, ‘Poetry is news that stays news,’ which is our actual emotions, our feelings [and] thoughts” (Rothschild). The poem represents just such an experience.

The events in Bosnia were ones that spurred a lot of political debate in 1993, the year “Peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina” was written. President Clinton decided to send US troops into the Balkans as part of the UN peacekeepers in order to halt the genocide and ethnic cleansing that was occurring in the country. The Republican Party derided this decision as ill advised and ill conceived. Republicans claimed it would bog the US down in a foreign land, for an indeterminate amount of time with no clear exit strategy or way to measure victory. The plan, they claimed, was so poorly designed that only a President with no military service could have conceived it. Ginsberg’s description of the atrocities that were being committed in “Peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina” gives the event immediacy and life that extends beyond a news cycle, a politician’s will to act or public interest.

Ginsberg continues writing his mind and what it is concerned with in the poem “God”. In doing so, he expresses his ideas on not only a political issue, but also one that has been of personal concern and interest to him. “God” represents Ginsberg’s own intellectual interest and curiosity in religion. He had spent much of his life trying to establish his own spiritual identity, a journey that took Ginsberg from a Jewish childhood to being a Buddhist as an adult.

“God” opens with the line “The 18 year old marine ‘made his Peace with God’” (14) and then proceeds with the poet asking what that means and which religious text are is going to used to define who or what God is. The poem then proceeds to make a number of historical and literary allusions. Ginsberg refers to the Christian version of Jesus Christ, the Muslim Allah, the Hebrew Jahweh, the Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses, Buddha, Confucius and other deities from around the world (14). The implicit question being asked of the reader is, which God did the marine make his peace with, and what, or does, selecting one over the other really mean?

Ginsberg alludes to a number of other political events in his questioning as well. He references the first Gulf War with the marine, the sentencing of Salman Rushdie to death for writing the novel *Satanic Verses* by the Ayatollah Khomeini, Billy Graham ministering to a disgraced Richard Nixon, and the televangelists that filled the airwaves asking for donations from their virtual flock. The use of free verse and prose language helps add to the stream-of-consciousness feeling the poem gives the reader. This choice by the poet helps the reader to experience certain feelings, the effect the poet wants is a sense of uncertainty and confusion about what seemed a straightforward statement in “made Peace with God” (14). In this poem, Ginsberg effectively comments not only on the xenophobic world view that most Americans have especially about the nonwestern world, but it also calls into question politicians, policy makers and reporters who play on our ignorance and use this seemingly simplistic quote as a tool to justify the actions of the United States by implying that “God must be on our side.” Ginsberg wants the reader to question this statement because it has become a “familiar message of mass culture that lend[s] itself] all too easily to political propaganda” (Johnston 105-06).

Another poem that continues along this same path and also represents Ginsberg’s own intellectual interest and curiosity about spirituality and religion is “New Stanzas for *Amazing Grace*.” Using the popular gospel song as a model, Ginsberg rewrites the lyrics to reflect a modern political issue, that despite media attention has not garnered the political attention, or solution that Ginsberg believes it should have received. This conclusion is supported by Ginsberg’s repeated use of homelessness as a theme in several of his poems written during this time period. Similar to his other work, Ginsberg uses a number of poetic and rhetorical devices to make the poem effective as both a political statement and poem. One literary device that is effective is the poem’s use of the first person “I.” This choice draws the reader into the dream of the narrator as an active participant, where he imagines what it must feel like to be homeless and, as a result, invisible to the common man. “I dreamed I dwelled in a homeless place / Where I was lost alone / Folk looked through me into space / and passed with eyes of stone” (Ginsberg 1-4, 17-21). This idea is reinforced by the repetition of this stanza at the end of the poem as well as at the beginning.

The poem also employs imagery that reinforces the reaction of the masses, in this case the narrator and the reader, to the homeless in their reluctance to see and engage with them in a meaningful way. For example, in the third stanza, Ginsberg again uses the image of the eye and its inability to see the less fortunate among us. “Woe workingman who hears the cry / And cannot spare a dime / Nor look into a

homeless eye / Afraid to give the time” (9-12). In this section, Ginsberg both passes judgment upon those who fail to acknowledge and lend assistance to those less fortunate. Similarly, in the fourth stanza Ginsberg extends this condemnation and offers a blessing to those people unfortunate enough to encounter these ungiving souls. “So rich or poor no gold to talk / A smile on your face / The homeless ones where you may walk / Receive amazing grace” (13-16).

This poem works as a political statement as well because of its rhetorical nature. Ginsberg is effective in articulating his convictions and persuading the reader of their validity through his invocation of the spiritual message of the hymn. In the standard lyrics, the singer thanks God for his grace that has returned the singer’s sight and allowed them to see the glory around them. As in earlier works, “New Stanzas for *Amazing Grace*” expresses Ginsberg’s “desire for spiritual realization and a sense [that we are as a society are] entrap(ed) in a world dominated by a consumerist ethos” (Johnston 116). By invoking this allusion, Ginsberg makes his political statement clear, but in a way that avoids catch phrases, buzzwords and the talking points of modern political commentary. In addition, the allusion helps give the poem added spiritual and moral weight that makes his call to action more compelling in stanza two “O homeless hand on many street / Accept this change from me / A friendly smile or word is sweet / as fearless charity” (18).

“Homeless Compleynt,” a poem that was written two years after “New Stanzas”, mines a similar vein both in subject matter and in sentiment. While it again “breaks the covenant of artistic discretion and delicacy by demanding that we think about the unpleasant” (Austin-Smith). Like “New Stanzas”, the narrator is homeless and also a Vietnam veteran, who is trying to engage the reader for help. The poem is free verse and has the narrator addressing the reader directly in a very conversational tone. The reader does get a sense of the narrator as someone who is perhaps ashamed of his past and his situation. This is supported by the first line of both stanzas, in which he apologizes to the reader for interrupting him. In addition, the narrator offers the reader reasons why he is worthy of assistance. He notes that he is “clean” (7, 14), a veteran who is psychologically scarred by the war (2-3), and that he does try to make his own way (17-18) but needs a little assistance to make it that day.

This poem, while it works as a political statement, is less effective than other political poems in the collection. Perhaps it is because it is “too specific in its aims, or too direct in its address, whereas art, so the argument goes, is subtle in method, and universal in appeal” (Austin-Smith). This is not to say the poem is without merit. It does evoke emotion and uses imagery to help convey its message, a message that is readily apparent. However, it lacks the light hand and artistry so readily apparent in “New Stanzas.”

During the 1980s and ‘90s, the government’s disregard of Vietnam veterans had made its way into popular culture. For example, the opening sequence in Eddie Murphy’s film *Trading Places* where he pretends to be a panhandling homeless vet, the music of Bruce Springsteen (*Born in the USA*), and news coverage of the issue added to the awareness of the problem of homelessness among former service men and women, an issue that achieved a level of notoriety in the popular media.

In addition, there were numerous news stories, articles and even benefits to aid the homeless, including Hands Across America and Comic Relief all designed to raise money for this issue. The intent of all of these was not only to highlight but also, as with the latter programs, to solve the issue despite cuts by the government in federal programs designed to address this problem. “Homeless Compleynt”

tries to address a political issue that had fallen off the political radar of many when it was written in 1996. In it, Ginsberg puts aside his feelings about Vietnam and embraces those who served and were scarred by the war in order to give voice to these outcasts.

“C’mon Pigs of Western Civilization Eat More Grease” is an excellent example of Ginsberg’s ability in terms of both his ability to write poetry, but also to deliver a sharply honed political message as well. The free verse poem addresses one of the political and sociological issues that concerned Ginsberg throughout much of his life, that of America’s love affair with consumerism. In this poem, Ginsberg takes Americans to task for their over-indulgence at the dinner plate in a way that is humorous and playful, yet leaves no question as to Ginsberg’s thinking on the issue.

It opens with “Eat, Eat more marbled Sirloin more Pork ‘n / gravy! / Lard up the dressing, fry chicken in / boiling oil” (1-4). These lines are highly effective in setting the mood and tone of the poem. Immediately you are drawn to its sense of absurdity and playfulness. Here is a poem that is embracing all of the negative aspects of American food culture, contradicting the countless reports in the media and medical advice and saying “Yes!” to gravy.

The poem continues for several more stanzas invoking images of Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Wimpy’s, McDonald’s, etc. stretching to the “moon” and eating it all until “burp!” and we’re done (24). In the first forty-three lines of the poem, there are only five lines that hint at the possible negative side effects of this type of diet. Even these references though are passed off in a playful tone. We are told to “watch out heart attack, pop more / angina pills / order a plate of Bratwurst and fried frankfurters” (20-22). Or “check yr. cholesterol, [and] swallow a pill” as we pack two more doughnuts under our “size 44 belt”, just before we pass out in the vomitorium coughing up strands of pastrami (30-35).

The poem makes excellent use of lists and imagery as it runs the gambit of all things that Americans love to consume and even mocks our obsession with super sizing our servings in the line “a mini big spoonful of salty” rice. The irony in the phrasing of this line is obvious. To describe a spoonful as being mini big indicates that it exceeds the size of normal spoons by a good margin. Yet this spoonful, which most readers would assume they know the size of, is not as large as it could be because it is a mini big spoonful. It is hard not to think of how sizes or portions at restaurants have grown larger and larger over the last several years.

It is not until a space break after line forty-nine that we begin to hear about the down side of a Western diet. Ginsberg weaves in references to the immigrants who fill many restaurant jobs, serve us up the gravy, and lard laden delicacies we crave, all the while, many cling to their healthier vegetarian or low meat diets that prevent many of the medical conditions described as the poem progresses. This however is changing.

This change is the political subject Ginsberg addresses in the poem. He addresses indirectly the culture creep of Western civilization, and in particular American culture. It is hard to escape the fact that the United States has been very successful in not only exporting Levis and movies, but also our appetites for “Western cuisine rich in protein / cancer heart attack hypertension sweat / bloated liver & spleen megally / Diabetes & stroke – monuments to carnivorous / civilizations” all of which are slowly killing the world (50-55).

Ginsberg even chastises Americans for our failure to “set an example for developing nations” (42). Despite this shift in tone, Ginsberg ends on a light note offering us “black forest chocolate cake”

because we deserve it (61-62). It is the sarcastic humor that helps make the poem work and the reader engaged and reading. It is able to balance effectively Ginsberg's political message with the craft demands of his poetry and continues the tradition begun with *Howl* to offer a "critique of American consumer culture" (Johnston).

In the end, his repeatedly turning to political events as grist for his poetry undermines Ginsberg's claim that he did not believe in political poetry. Ginsberg came of age in "the early Cold War years [that] were marked by an unprecedented politicization of culture and by the conscription of private life in the name of national security. The key to political containment abroad was, then, personal self-containment at home" (Harris 172). It was this self-censorship and societal pressure to conform that Ginsberg spent his life railing against in thought, action and poetry. Ginsberg had seen first hand that if people were unable to strike back at their enemies then "the most vigilant patriots [would go] after the scalps of their countrymen instead" in an effort to protect "their" way of life (Whalen-Bridge 618).

Ginsberg responded the only way he knew how, with words. By doing so, he hoped to expose the idea of conformity as corrupt and those promoting it as a "small band of thieves, [from both the] right and left, [that were] taking [it] upon themselves to be dictators and lead everybody astray" (Brown). This act proves Ginsberg loved his country, regardless of what he may have thought of its government (Kauffman). Ginsberg, through the act of writing poetry about those things that filled his mind, wrote about the political decisions that impacted him and in doing so made himself into a political poet despite his feelings to the contrary.

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