

## A CONVERSATION WITH ALLEN GINSBERG

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This conversation was held in apartment number 219 of the Varsity Town Houses, where Allen Ginsberg normally lives in the month of July. He teaches Creative Writing at Naropa Institute.

The interview had been arranged two months previously for July, not for a fixed date. In the end it took place on July 24th. Due to his busy schedule (Allen Ginsberg admits to being a «workaholic») and to the unexpected arrival of the translator of his works into German, the conversation lasted barely forty minutes.

During the interview a student, Allen Ginsberg's translator and a girlfriend of the latter were also present.

When the interview finished, we had a coffee and talked for more than an hour about Spanish poetry. Allen Ginsberg, who was now more relaxed than he had been during the interview, was particularly interested in the works of Federico García Lorca and Rafael Alberti.

B.: How does poetry affect history?; how is your poetry affected by history?

A.G.: It depends on what you mean by history.

B.: Yes, that's the problem...

A.G.: Well, it's not the problem, we just have to decide how we want to use the word. There is not a fixed definition of the word history, so everyone who talks sensibly defines the word, that's all.

There are several uses of the word, you can say personal history...

B.: I mean...

A.G.: Let me FINISH! We could say personal history and it could be defined as, mmm, how the history of your friendship affects your poetry and how your poetry affects your friendships, particularly love poems and to what extent are your friends historical, to what extent they do affect history and to what extent do you affect history with your friends like the Beatles or the Beat Generation.

(Telephone call: Peter Orlovsky phoned)

Then the other aspect is history as it is written in the newspaper, the radio and the media and in the government. But there is an interrelationship between what a group of friends do like people in the CIA, a small group of people can affect history, or like the NSA, National Security Agency like Oliver North and his friends. So in the case of literacy a group like the Dadaists, the Futurists... those groups are friends that affect history also, change public consciousness, change attitudes towards government and towards politics and so, in some respect, they affect history like the Russian teachers who were part of the prerevolutionary fermentated change of consciousness. Or Marinetti and the Italian Futurists had a big effects on Mussolini, or used by Mussolini or also created the Militaristic Futurism that fitted into the Fascist consciousness.

In my own case, I think that my association with Burroughs and Kerouac and Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky and the feeling about the writers had some impact on public consciousness, changed generation consciousness, that in the long run had some effect on history or public policy in the following areas:

— First, attitudes toward the differences between public and private speech that in the past there had always been a big strict opinion or separation between the mood of public speech and the mood of private speech. Private speech was the truth you told your friends and Public speech was the manipulated, partially lying, that you would do in public. So we tried to break down that difference.

— Secondly, was maybe spiritual liberation derived from Whitman and Spenser.

— Third was the liberation of the word and censorship in America, and that led to all different kinds of liberation movements: women liberation, gay liberation and black liberation as well; after liberation spirit leading to liberation of word, leading to liberation of public discourse and leading to black liberation, gay liberation, women liberation, world liberation, liberation from word and a new liberation, human liberation as against a hyperscientistic hyperrationalism, so that they extended towards... (as a result of the liberal movement, by part of the liberal movement, accompanying the liberal movement) some sense of change of consciousness, a new vision, a new consciousness or overreason consciousness, that led to social changes in the United States.

In the case of women liberation... well I cannot say because I don't think it's causing a new effect; it's just a part of the same biological wave towards survival. In that world that led later on to or also a psychedelic consciousness, that in the sixties' flowered in ecological consciousness, in a sense of ecological interconnection as now is a dominant mood in international thinking, or will be in any case, because it is in everyone. So that is the way that liberation of speech affects public consciousness and politics, and because back to William Carlos Williams's statement: «the government is all words» that is when we make, we have laws, speeches, television, parliament... so it's all words, so it's all speech.

And the other was how history affects poetry.

B.: Yes, YOUR poetry

A.G.: MM... there's a lot.

B.: In the first books history didn't seem to be important, then in *Howl*. I mean, in *The Gates of Wrath*...

A.G.: Well, there's quite a bit in *Empty Mirror*, and... you know that little poem about America...

B.: Yes, «where America are you going».

A.G.: And also mmm..., in a sense of Psychedelic America «Negroes climbing around West Avenue» and also the «Crazy Spiritual»... So there are a lot poems like that. Then in *Howl*, second book.

B.: *Howl* is the one I meant...

A.G.: Well, actually the second one is «Siesta in Xbalba» which is a prophecy about America, what is America from the third world. Then in *Howl* a poem: «America» which is making fun of American History. And «*Howl*» has got a lot of historical references and some of them in reference..., not MacCarthysm but the cultural..., cultural conformism of that time. It wasn't a protest against it, it was only a statement of individualism as against the standard issue, conventional limits of feeling... so that's an extension of feeling. And then, as I've written a great number of times, still a good reference point is Plato: «When the mode of music changes the walls of the city shake» Plato was afraid of that, he was worried about that, was against that..., you know, introducing a new mode that could disturb this world of us, because when there is a new attitude in art, in poetry, in humanity, this psychological take, or relationship, it means that people's relationship to the State changes, the law and the manners and so the walls of the city shake, the foundations of the city shake. As an example of that is the levitation of the Pentagon in 1968. Conservatives, liberals were confused that there was a success of the Democratic campaign rise. It was like very stupid thinking that the levitation meant the actual lift but it meant that dismythified, or disconstructed, discontract the image of the Pentagon. The metaphor of the Pentagon was fragile mentally, so that a boy pushing a flower into the garret of a gun immediately turned up the story and dismythified her, took away the authority of the Pentagon and left it with a, as a contest against —the swearing soldier and a nice— looking boy with a flower, flower power. And flower power as a poetic metaphor is really ecological power, which doesn't mean silly wavy walking around in long dresses and round glasses, taking the power of Nature as it is, the destruction of Nature by machines. Oh well that's what it came to me as a sort of intuition. So the reverse is that are the effects of it in politics. Naturally like any ordinary, anybody reading the papers and listening to music, watching television and reading *New York Times* or *Washington Post* or *The Economist* or *Le Monde* or *El Correo (sic) de la Sera*, or *die Spiegel* and read... what's the Spanish one?

B.: *El País* is the best Known or...

A.G.: I see Spanish magazines in South America and so naturally that filled my head like anybody else, with, you know, 250.000 people starving in Sudan, homeless in NY under my window roof, Nuclear poisoning at Rocky Flats down here where we've been picketing for many years and then obviously they treated us like a bunch of criminals, you know the FBI...

B.: Yes, you wrote about that in «Plutonian Ode».

A.G.: In 1978 same evidence was already available but the government and the media didn't want to recognise that they were poisoning the atmosphere. So naturally public conscience influences private, particularly this huge threat of planet sickness as if the planet, now at age, the immune system of nature can... correct or readjust the devastation of the human viruses.

In terms of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. The Earth... poisoned with nuclear materials and deforestation and desertification.

The Air has been affected, poisoned by pollution, acid rain, smoke falling over the Arctic...

Water... beaches, fishing areas, coastal shores are poisoned, losing their nutrients. The Mediterranean is going dead, the Baltic is affected 10% of the, 90% of the herring supplies are now gone, Rhine has been poisoned, water is being poisoned as well as the Aqua... subterranean water springs are now beginning to be threatened with nuclear and other waste, with nitrates por PVC or fertilizers.. so that's the waters, that's the earth, air.

The fire, the very source of our energy... petrochemical and nuclear is the source threatening the earth. So they're all our chemical materials: earth, air, water, fire, they're all being poisoned, so naturally that affects anybody on any street, on any apartment, on any desk, so I naturally think about it and write about it.

And then the increasing Police State in America is another problem, with more and more right wing, conservative people taking over the government, especially in the Courts, in the same model, paralel model as they have of military or secret government controls in Latin America: Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Dominican Republic. The CIA intervention or secret military intervention that has already started here, that's what the Irangate is about, or the offself operations or secret government operations in both external and domestic, the EDE which is Emergency Detention of Disidents that is organized, ruled by Oliver North, you know about that. Well the Detention... Yeah that is planned in case of a war with Nicaragua say. And the... like the result of this speech is in any way that my own poetry has in the last years banned from being broadcast, «Howl» is now no longer able to be read on radio stations.

The FCC, the radio Communication Commision has a new regulatin banning cock and indecent words like cock on the air 24 hours a day.

B.: But that's a step backwards.

A.G.: Yes, that's what I'm talking about. This is a constant problem. I don't Know if you saw the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Howl*. It is an annotated edition and bibliographical with footnotes and the original manuscript and footnotes for

each line, each verse giving a literary background and in the front there a lot of statements of how I had designed the poem to be read to, be around people, actually in school books in case of writing crack down. It's a little or sort of subversive reminder or of words as you know where you could have a clean anglosaxon word like fuck and as a... some image of resistance to Police State.

So history is not the main subject, the subject is nature consciousness and an examination of what passes thru the mind, the ordinary mind, destruction of forms; so it is first thought-best thought, more or less spontaneous following the sequence of thoughts in the mind and, naturally politics poems or history poems. So that's for history. Does it make sense?

B.: Are there any connections between what's happening in America and in Europe, this new consciousness, I mean the green parties...

A.G.: Oh Yes! the ecological parties, that's more of the same movement I was talking about. I think it's an indigeous European movement. But I think America began doing that in poetry like Snyder and MacClure. And McClure is here, you should talk to him about that. But I think the sensitization of the individual consciousness, that's important.

B.: That's been the movement since the 19th century.

A.G.: Everybody says that.

B.: And do you think it will happen?

A.G.: Nnn no, to the ordinary bohemians, I think, although with the threat to human existence that senses more expansive consciousness, biologically threathened it's self preservation. Burroughs says that in one of his last works, yes it's beautiful. He said: «Things have gotten so bad in this planet that only a miracle will save it. Do you remember how he said it?

Student: That's how it is, yes, only a miracle.

A.G.: mm a miracle.

B.: And do you think so? A miracle will save it?

A.G.: No, not me. Burroughs said only a miracle will save.

B.: Do you agree?

A.G.: If I agree..., well..., yes. It's almost impossible to save it. It will take a miracle.

Myself I don't disbelieve in miracles. Human nature is a miracle, we have many Kinds of miracles, the birth of the universe is a miracle, the death of the universe is a miracle, the whole universe is a miracle, time is a miracle. Actually the best thing I've heard, I don't know if you've heard about this is how to deal with nuclear waste. The latest American idea derived from... do you remember that?

Student: No.

A.G.: This woman, she is a Buddhist went to Germany and England and all the different waste lands and said the only way of dealing with nuclear waste is to make it sacred and to make churches out of waste dumps because otherwise, If they sow them around they're going to be lost in 2000 years and any civilization will stumble on it and get burnt. So burning or hiding it will be a science fiction monster. So the thing to do is, when they close the nuclear plants, make giant concrete templa, temples with sacred guardians and then generation after generation with a literature of what is going on there so that nobody stumbles on it by accident. And also as a sacramental reminder of how things can go bad, what evil is and, as a way of guardianship, the sacred guardians of the sacred poison or evil. It's a great way of transforming the fear of it into wisdom and the technical problem of how to contain it to an open secret since there's a big responsibility in these centuries of poisoning. You make a big church there and anybody goes or stays there...

That was invented by Joanna Macy this year, she formulated it, took it to the engineers, lots of engineers have it and it contains the regular activity, put a floor... Instead of the old technology to bury it in the soil which sweeps it around and it'll get lost. So the point is not to bury the waste but to make it sacred.

Boulder (Colorado)  
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