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FROM SOCIETY TO SELF: GINSBERG'S INWARD TURN IN MIND BREATHS

Critical response to Allen Ginsberg's *Mind Breaths*--which contains most of Ginsberg's poetry of the 70s--has been, at best, ambivalent and, at worst, negative. Hayden Carruth, who has, by far, been the most accepting critic of Ginsberg's recent poetry, says that "*Mind Breaths* [presents] a half-dozen poems, maybe more, that are first rate Ginsberg." *Mind Breaths,* Ginsberg's third-largest collection of poetry, contains thirty-six poems; the majority of pieces, for Carruth, fall short, one must assume, because they represent Ginsberg when he is "not so good, too full of random, unassimilated political rage," as Carruth says. The best of the poems, says Carruth, are "poems of imagination, poems arising from within, complexes of feeling that come to consciousness with their own structure already within them" (15). Other recent critics of Ginsberg, however, have spoken little of "imagination" and "complexes of feeling" in relation to the same volume. Mark Shechner says that "most of the poems [in *Mind Breaths*] seem like refrains from earlier books, and far less inspired ones at that"; and he adds that "whatever such methodologies [as meditative chanting] have contributed to Ginsberg's durability and his public figure . . . they have brought little to the poetry save heavy breathing and a treasury of lambent phrases to be sprinkled over a stew, for oriental pungency." Paul Berman, though he praises some of the poems in *Mind Breaths* for being "cosmic-ferocious" or for having "conventional structural devices," talks as much about the "wastes of time in *Mind Breaths*," the poems that can "only be read with great effort" or the disappointing "political poems . . . [which] echo with political poems past." The "political poems past" should not be imitated, Berman implies, for they "can't be beat."

Whether critical response to *Mind Breaths* has been ambivalent or negative, one contention of which critics seem always aware is that, as Shechner puts it, "nothing [Ginsberg] has done since the poems in *Kaddish* (1961) shows any advance in vision or technique" (333). Though Carruth and Berman, obviously, would disagree somewhat with Shechner, they have never gone beyond discussing the merits of individual poems to discussing any shifts or, as Shechner says, "advances" in vision or technique in *Mind Breaths* or, indeed, in any of the later poetry in general, which, of course, suggests that there have been no shifts. This, I believe, is unfortunate, for there are indeed poems in *Mind Breaths* which signal an important thematic shift for Ginsberg away from the themes implicit in the earlier poetry. Probably the reason critics have overlooked this thematic shift is because not all of the poems in *Mind Breaths* contribute to the shift, and it has been these non-contributing pieces which have received the harshest criticism and which, most likely, have turned critics away from the book too soon. Therefore, before I look at the thematic shift itself, I think it is first necessary to get a clearer view of what specific qualities of *Mind Breaths* critics have faulted.

Mind Breaths is a complex volume--complex, that is, if one attempts to find thematic and compositional coherence among all of the poems here. Ginsberg himself--perhaps as a capitulating response to critics who have found fault with this randomness--entitles the notes for *Mind Breaths* in the back of his *Collected Poems* "Mind Breaths All Over." In *Mind Breaths*, there are meditative poems (e.g., "Thoughts Sitting Breathing"), narrative poems (e.g., "Mugging"), songs (e.g., "Rolling Thunder Stones"), declarative poems[1] (e.g., "Manifesto"), quasi-haiku (e.g., "Totem Village"), and pseudo-eulogies (e.g., "Sweet Boy, Gimme yr Ass"). Lack of stylistic coherence alone is enough to turn some critics away from a "collection" of poems, for most reviewers and critics, as we have seen from the examples above, approach any volume with a pre-established criteria for what is good and what is bad poetry. Any volume which throws at the reader so many different types of poems will, because, say, a "song" requires very different compositional considerations than a haiku, necessarily disappoint the reader who has a strictly defined

1. See my discussion of declarative poems in "'Vein of Fire': Relationships Among Lawrence's Pansies," *The D. H. Lawrence Review*. 16.2 (1983): 165-181.

sense of what a poem "is" or who comes at a volume expecting compositional coherence. *Howl* and *Kaddish* were, compared to *Mind Breaths*, compositionally coherent volumes--and, indeed, thematically coherent volumes. And they were praised. The destructiveness of "Moloch," the effect of "Moloch" and the lack of individual, a-material spirituality on the individual pervade the poems of *Howl* and *Kaddish*. Such overall coherence is absent from *Mind Breaths*.

The problems with *Mind Breaths* go deeper, though, than compositional incoherence for critics. There are generally two reasons why Ginsberg's poems in *Mind Breaths*--and, indeed, those in the later volume *Plutonian Ode*--have suffered critically: 1) they have sacrificed the illustrative, imitative qualities of much poetry considered "good" for the rhyming-couplet conventions of songs or the dogmatic-statement convention of the declarative poem; 2) they have included details--often personal, homosexual, or Buddhist-Trungpa-related
--which seem, to the reader, irrelevant to the overall purpose or detrimental to the overall effect of the poems. A brief examination of a poem from each category should elucidate why, for critics, they fail.

Ginsberg was probably not concerned in the least about what critics would say when he decided to include song lyrics in his poetry books. He also, though, would probably not call his songs "poems." Take, for example, the first two stanzas of "Gospel Noble Truths," one of five songs in *Mind Breaths*:

> Born in this world
> You got to suffer
> Everything changes
> You got no soul
>
> Try to be gay
> Ignorant happy
> You get the blues
> You eat the jellyroll (*MB* 71)

The main problem, of course, with conventional rhyming-couplet song lyrics like those of "Gospel Noble Truths" is that they generally, unlike much so-called good poetry, do not offer anything for the reader to grasp onto--in the way of illustration, example--besides the speaker's declarations, such as "You got to suffer" and "Everything changes/You got no soul"; they do not, as good poems generally do, create their own context through details and imagery but rely,

instead, on the listener's being able to "fill in" his own detailed context--plug in his own experience--to the abstract emotional framework which the lyrics present. The effectiveness of such songs--or of declarative poems, which share with songs the characteristics of lack of illustrations and an abundance of "declarations"--also depends upon the listener's being sympathetic beforehand to the statements made by the artist. If, for example, the listener does not agree that "You got no soul" or that "You got to suffer," the song, or poem, fails, for there is no form of substantiation--no illustrative context built up around the statements--for the listener to grasp onto. This is undoubtedly not what Carruth was referring to when he spoke of Ginsberg's best poetry as having "complexes of feeling that come to consciousness with their own structure already within them." Ginsberg, in such songs, is almost entirely conscious of the pre-imposed *external* structure of "iambic dimeter, rhyming couplet" when he composes a song such as "Gospel Noble Truths." Critics have, understandably, then, written off such work as trivial.

Ginsberg is--beginning with *Mind Breaths* and continuing, to a greater extent, into *Plutonian Ode*--experimenting more and more with the unsubstantiated declarative poem, using declarations like "You got to suffer" without giving the reader the telling-detail-packed substantiation that was so characteristic of him. In "Howl," for example, the reader was initially told that "the best minds of my generation [were] destroyed by madness," (*H* 9) but the remainder of the poem explained in detail how and why this was so. It *showed* the reader. Ginsberg, in some poems in *Mind Breaths* (and even more in *Plutonian Ode*), is doing more telling than showing, and this fact, along with the fact that much of what Ginsberg *tells* the reader would, ostensibly, be better understood if the reader came to the poems with a knowledge of Ginsberg's Buddhist-Trungpa teachings and vocabulary, has put critics off--and, one must imagine, a good many ordinary readers.

But, if one can get beyond some of Ginsberg's declarative songs and give a close reading to some of the poems that use declarations as a poetic device, one can see a good deal of authorial intention and that, indeed, Ginsberg is not simply stagnating with regard to either technique or vision. "Jaweh And Allah Battle" (*MB* 36-39) is a good example of a poem heavy in declarations--and a poem which, critics have implied, is too filled with declarations and Trungpa-related details to mean much to the reader.

Since the poem is too long to quote in its entirety, I'll just present the last few lines, which, to some, no matter what lines came before, would provide little satisfaction as an "ending":

> Maintain our Separate Identity! Proud
> History evermore!
> Defend our own bodies here this Holy Land! This hill
> Golgotha never forget, never relinquish
> inhabit thru Eternity
> under Allah Christ Yaweh forever one God
> Shema Yisroel Adonoi Eluhenud Adonoi Echad!
> La Illaha Illa'llah Hu!
> OY! AH! HU! OY! AH HU!
> SHALOM! SHANTIH! SALAAM! (38-39)

This, no doubt, is what critics find distasteful and what Mark Shechner refers to when he talks of Ginsberg's "heavy breathing" and "treasury of lambent phrases sprinkled over a stew, for oriental pungency."

Yet just from these lines one can see--unless one's predisposition against Buddhist teachings or any words or things atypical or incomprehensible prevents a close reading--that Ginsberg's theme here is serious; that his method is not random or redundant--not relying totally on his former "great" poems; and that it is indeed significant that many of the Buddhist-related words at the end of "Jaweh And Allah Battle" are not understandable to many. What the poem leads up to, through a declamatory description of fighting "gods" with parallels to infamous politicians ("Both Gods Terrible" [36]; "HITLER AND STALIN SENT ME HERE" [37]), is the sentiment that the individual, in the midst of the inevitable chaos created by politics, must, as the poet says, "Maintain [his] Separate Identity!" (38) and "inhabit thru Eternity!" (38), no matter what separates him ideologically ("Under Allah Christ Yaweh" [39]) from others. Hence the chanting at the end of the poem--"OY! AH! HU! OY! AH! HU!/SHALOM SHANTIH SALAAM!"--is both an affirmation of the poet's individual "Identity" (because some of the things he chants are most likely meaningful only to himself) and an expression of what he calls for in the poem: a governmentless individual "Identity" that nevertheless is accepting of others--"under Allah Christ Yaweh forever one God," the poem exclaims.

With this distillation of the "message" of "Jaweh And Allah Battle," one may begin already to disagree with Shechner's assertion that none of Ginsberg's poetry since *Kaddish* "shows any advance in vision or technique."

Though Ginsberg has often pictured the rebelling individual and condemned established government and societal mores in the earlier poems of *Howl* and *Kaddish*, never before has in the earlier poems of *Howl* and *Kaddish*, never before has he posited a solution which would allow the individual to at least cope personally with the chaos of conflicting governments. Even if the solution offered in "Jaweh And Allah Battle" could be called a passive, ego-centric one, it is nevertheless an advance from the poems of *Howl* and *Kaddish*, which went a long way in exposing and railing against the problems of the individual in a problem-filled society ("Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb" [*H* 30]) but stopped short of offering a solution, a way out, for the individual. Indeed, by the end of *Kaddish*, the individual, having suffered with the painful knowledge of where society's ills will lead ("This is the End/of man" [*K* 91]), is left in despair:

> The universe turns inside out to devour me!
> and the mighty burst of music comes from out the inhuman
> door-- (*K* 98)

In some of the poetry of *Mind Breaths*--and, again, one cannot make sweeping generalizations about all of the poems here--there is the implication that, for the individual, the only way out of the madness created by societies askew, run by governments which, in conflicting with other governments, create more chaos and, hence, anxiety for the individual, is to take refuge in the Self, to retreat, in a sense, into one's "Separate Identity" and to live out the remainder of one's life there. "Yes And It's Hopeless" evinces early on in *Mind Breaths* the attitude out of which this solution for the individual comes:

> the energy crisis, the protein crisis 1990, the Folklore Crisis,
> the Aboriginal Crisis, the Honkie Crisis, the old Nazi
> Crisis, the Arab Crisis, the Chrysophrase Crisis, Tungsten, the crisis in Panama, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina,
> Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Santo Domingo, Haiti,
> Cuba, Florida, Alabama, Texas, New Jersey, New York,
> East 10th Street, the Crisis in San Juan Capistrano, the
> Oil-spill in Bolinas Bay, Santa Barbara's tar tide, the crisis
> of the Loch Ness Monster & the Dublin Bomb Crisis,
> all hopeless,... (*MB* 13)

Here the anxiety resulting from "hopelessness" is in full force, the anxiety, one could say, built up and expressed through all of Ginsberg's books up to *Mind Breaths*. One can see even in the titles of most of the earlier books expressions of anxiety, of the individual ill-at-ease and talking "reality" all the way through: *Howl, Reality Sandwiches, Planet News, The Fall of America*. And then comes *Mind Breaths*--the very title suggesting a release from the psychological anxiety expressed in earlier books.

And indeed, except for "Yes And It's Hopeless" and, to a lesser degree, "Under The World There's A Lot Of Ass, A Lot of Cunt" (which stands next to "Yes And It's Hopeless"), the other poems in *Mind Breaths*, aside from the songs, do express the poet's desire to revel in the personal "Identity" spoken of in "Jaweh And Allah Battle," to escape from the anxiety of the hopeless society and reflect upon concerns of a less temporal nature than, say, those in *Howl*. Poems of this type are, by far, the most predominant in *Mind Breaths*: "Xmas Gift," "Thoughts Sitting Breathing," "What Would You Do If You Lost It," "Returning To The Country For A Brief Visit," "Night Gleam," "What I'd Like To Do," "Mind Breaths," "Flying Elegy," "Hospital Window," and the long "Contest Of Bards" are the most significant, their themes manifested most succinctly, perhaps, in the first few words of "What I'd Like To Do": "Retire abandon world" (*MB* 23).

Personal details and images abound in these poems, details and images which, unlike those of earlier books, point to the individual's having removed himself from society as a way of maintaining personal sanity. In "What I'd Like To Do," the poet tabulates a long list of *a-worldly*, personal activities, activities no longer directed at changing society or rebelling against it:

> Step in same river twice
> Build hermitage of wood and stone with porch 3000 feet up
> Rockies, Sierras, Catskills fine soft forests
> sit crosslegged straight spine belly relaxed heart humming
> Ah each exhalation...
>
> Compose poems to the wind.... (*MB* 23)

After thirty-seven lines of listing things he'd "Like To Do," the poet brings the reader back to the present, to his present, ending the poem with the lines, "War's over, soft mat wood floor, flower vase on inkstand, blue/oaks gazing in the window" (*MB* 24). Since there has been, obviously, no reference to war in the poem, one can only assume, given the theme of this poem--and, indeed, of *Mind Breaths*--and given the themes of earlier Ginsberg books, that the "War" here refers to the state of the individual in poems like "Howl" or "America"--or almost any of the poems up through *The Fall of America*--the constant struggle of the individual with the society, which is now, of course, "hopeless." One can

sense a tremendous "letting go" with these last lines, a release of long-pent-up frustration, as the focus shifts, at last, to the here and now of personal, gentle surroundings, which are all, to be sure, that matters in the end: "soft mat wood floor, flower vase on inkstand, blue oaks gazing in the window."

"Hospital Window" similarly expresses the poet's--or the individual's--release into the Self after, this time, being re-introduced to the outside world after having been sick from "taking the wrong medicine" (*MB* 59). The images of New York City are familiar to Ginsberg readers:

> At gauzy dusk, thin haze like cigarette smoke
> ribbons past Chrysler Building's silver fins
> tapering delicately needletopped, Empire State's
> taller antenna filmed milky lit amid blocks...
>
> --Cars running up
> East River Drive, & parked at N.Y. Hospital's oval door
> where perfect tulips flower the health of a thousand sick souls
> trembling inside hospital rooms. Triboro bridge steel-spiked
> raftertops stand stone-pierced over mansard
> penthouse orange roofs, chemical blood boiling
> in research lab floors--Cancer & Herpes Vats testing.... (*MB* 58)

Disease, pollution, steel, traffic congestion, trembling "sick souls"
--these are all familiar images of a troubled society that, formerly, would have inspired Ginsberg to put "[his] queer shoulder to the wheel" (*H* 34) and fight. But, in keeping with the predominant theme of the poems in *Mind Breaths*, a theme which does indeed signal a major change in Ginsberg's poetry, a single image solitarily rising above the chaos and leaving it ends the poem: "A seagull passes alone wings/spread silent over roofs" (*MB* 59). Here, as with "What I'd Like To Do," the poet finds solace in removing himself from--rather than confronting--chaos.

That this break from society, whether brief or permanent, is a necessity for the Self is again implied in the twenty-six page "Contest of Bards," the final poem of *Mind Breaths*. After a long, tumultuous meeting between the Bard and a "boy," the main topic of which is "the ancient unearthly Beauty" (*MB* 101), the Bard's final words to the "boy," in the poem's epilogue, point to this ultimate necessary separation between World and Inner Self: "Hearts beating thru the world's Mills & Wires . . . Careful to respect *our* Heart, mindful of Beauty's slow working Calm Machine" (*MB* 117; emphasis added); and finally the poem ends with another declaration of the discovery of the inner

Self as the only worthy goal, the only non-chaotic permanence: "Shining thru railroad windows on new-revealed faces, our own inner forms!" (*MB* 118). Thus the major thematic pronouncement of *Mind Breaths* is one which encourages nourishment of and communion with the inner Self, an inner "form," and which would, as well, suggest that involvement with the tragedies of society is only a hindrance to achieving that inner peace, which is, since all else is "hopeless," the only achievable goal left.

With the thematic suggestions of these poems as a backdrop, the poem "Mind Breaths" stands out as the realization, in poetic form, of an inner peace, an inner calmness, which allows the individual to reflect upon the outer world and to take in the outer world without becoming either actively involved in it or emotionally disturbed by it. "Mind Breaths" is the only poem in the volume which shows the poet, as it were, "acting" to manage the world around him. Other poems--"Yaweh And Allah Battle," "Yes And It's Hopeless," "What I'd Like To Do," "Hospital Window"--have suggested that one must cultivate the inner Self or achieve an inner peace instead of or before confronting the outer world, but "Mind Breaths" is the first and only poem in the volume which depicts the individual actually as having achieved that inner peace and thereby providing an example of, in a sense, the "solution" for the individual. Appropriately, then, the poem begins with the word "Thus," a signal to the reader that a solution or conclusion is being reached, a solution which, if one has taken in the import of certain poems around "Mind Breaths," is both predictable and informative:

> Thus crosslegged on round pillow sat in Teton Space--
> I breathed upon the aluminum microphone-stand a body's
> length away
> I breathed upon the teacher's throne, the wooden chair with
> yellow pillow
> I breathed further, past the sake cup half emptied by the
> breathing guru
> Breathed...
>
> my breath thru nostril floated out to the moth of evening...
>
> breathed over the mountain, over snow powdered crags...
>
> out toward Reno's neon, dollar bills skittering downstreet... (*MB* 27)
>
> over Gary's tile roof, over temple pillar, tents and manzanita...
>
> over Hawaii a balmy wind thru Hotel palmtrees,...

up thru Darwin Land, out Gove Peninsula, green ocean... (28)

A fog horn blowing in the China Sea, torrential rains over
Saigon, bombers float over Cambodia, ...
Soft breezes up thru Red Sea to Elat's dry hotels,.. (29)

across the Channel rough black-green waves, in London's
Piccadily beer cans roll on concrete neath Eros' silver
breast,.. (30)

a breath returns vast gliding grass flats cow-dotted into Jack-
son Hole, ...

into the cafeteria at Teton Village under the red tram lift
a calm breath, a silent breath, a slow breath breathes outward
from the nostrils. (31)

Though the poet's breath here flows out to the farthest corners of the earth from where he is sitting--or flows "over" and "thru" many places in the outer world--it is important to note that 1) he is sitting "crosslegged on round pillow," at ease and at peace, when his breath begins this journey; 2) his breath passes over scenes which could be described as pleasant ("over the mountain, over snow powdered crags"; "Soft breezes up thru Red Sea"), ones which could be described as emotionally pleasant or neutral ("over Gary's tile roof, over temple pillar"; "up thru Darwin Land"), and ones which are clearly unpleasant ("Reno's neon, dollar bills skittering downstreet"; "torrential rains over Saigon, bombers float over Cambodia"), and yet the description throughout the poem is non-judgmental, matter-of-fact, dispassionate, objective; 3) his emotional state, by the end of the poem, remains unchanged: "calm," "silent," "slow." All of these facts point to the poet's having attained the inner peace that was implicitly called for in the other poems. There are no emotional variations in the poem; unlike other poems in the volume, such as "What I'd Like To Do" or "Hospital Window," the last lines of which startle the reader with their sudden breaking-off from the original subjects of the poems ("War's over, . . ."; "A seagull passes alone . . ."), there is an evenness of both tone and emotion throughout "Mind Breaths." The poet starts out sitting "crosslegged," relaxed, breathing, and he ends up "calm," "silent," "slow," breathing "outward from the nostrils." The poet here, recalling "Contest of Bards," has fully understood and acted out the Bard's--and the book's--final advice: "Careful to respect our Heart, mindful of Beauty's slow working Calm Machine" (*MB* 117). The poem "Mind Breaths" thus

becomes, in a sense, the centerpiece of the volume, standing as the incarnation--the enactment--of the individual's solution to managing the outer world, a solution which is but longingly hinted at in other poems --or explained, rather than illustrated, in "Contest of Bards"--and it underscores, finally, the dramatic shift Ginsberg has taken thematically away from earlier volumes.

The point here has not been--as it so often becomes in literary explications--to suggest that the poetry in *Mind Breaths* is "better" or "worse" than Ginsberg's earlier poetry but to point out that a significant thematic shift is occurring in the poetry which has been hitherto overlooked. Whether this shift is, as Shechner and the other critics have suggested it is not, an "advance in vision" for Ginsberg is really a moot question. One would, of course, first have to define "advance"--a word which, when dealing with intangible movements or shifts, is very problematic, and perhaps even more so when talking about poetic "vision." The point is, I believe--and this is what critics have failed to perceive, probably because certain poems in *Mind Breaths* (e.g., the "songs") have turned critics away from the entire volume--that the poems of *Mind Breaths* are not re-hashing the topics and themes of *Howl* and *Kaddish*. They reveal a changing Ginsberg. The Ginsberg of *Howl, Kaddish, The Fall of America* is, compared to the Ginsberg of *Mind Breaths*, an angry one, a Ginsberg crying "change" or "rebel," not "Hopeless" or "mindful of Beauty's slow working Calm Machine." It is indeed apropos that Ginsberg's poems of the 70s--a decade labeled by the media the "me-decade"--are, in essence, advocating this nourishment of the inner Self rather than railing against the "madness" that destroys great minds. Ginsberg's poems have always been literary indicators of the nation's temperament, and the poems of *Mind Breaths*, true to tradition, keep pace certainly with the 70s, when they were written, and, since there has been no discernible change, the 80s as well.

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