

Mind, Heart, and Breath: Embodiment in Allen Ginsberg's Long-Lined Poetry

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Abstract

This paper explores Allen Ginsberg's poetry through the lens of embodiment and corporeality. It shows how, in Ginsberg's poems, the relationship between the physical and the formal is incredibly tight: indeed, the two often coincide. This paper considers two remarkable examples of embodiment: *Kaddish* (1961) and poems from *Mind Breaths* (1977). In *Kaddish*, physical embodiment is embedded in the poetic verse through the representation of female grotesque physicality. This reflects formally, as the line itself leaks in length and unraveling, reflecting unboundedness and fluidity. In poems from *Mind Breaths*, Ginsberg experiments with a new kind of embodiment, one in which consciousness becomes equated with breath. In these poems, he achieves a coincidence between breath and line in both the content and the form of the poems. This paper ultimately sheds light on how Ginsberg's long line creates and facilitates exchanges between the physical and the formal in his poems.

Keywords: American poetry, Allen Ginsberg, embodiment, corporeality, long line.

Mente, corazón y respiración: la corporalidad del verso largo en la poesía de Allen Ginsberg

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la poesía de Allen Ginsberg desde la perspectiva de la corporalidad. En él se muestra cómo, en los poemas de Ginsberg, la relación entre lo físico y lo formal es extremadamente estrecha: de hecho, los dos

a menudo coinciden. Este texto examina dos ejemplos notables de corporalidad: *Kaddish* (1961) y algunos poemas de *Mind Breaths* (1977). En *Kaddish*, la corporalidad física está incorporada en el verso poético a través de la representación del físico femenino grotesco. Esto se refleja en su forma, ya que dicho verso largo se desborda y rebosa, reflejando vastedad y fluidez. En algunos poemas de *Mind Breaths*, Ginsberg experimenta con un nuevo tipo de corporalidad, en el que la conciencia se equipara con la respiración. En estos poemas logra una coincidencia entre aliento y verso tanto en el contenido como en la forma de los poemas. Finalmente, este artículo pone de manifiesto cómo el uso del verso largo de Ginsberg crea y facilita intercambios entre lo físico y lo formal en sus poemas.

Palabras clave: Poesía norteamericana, Allen Ginsberg, *embodiment*, corporalidad, verso largo.

1. Moving Towards Embodiment

At the end of March 1950, 23-year-old Allen Ginsberg wrote a letter that would change his life and jumpstart his career as a poet. This letter from an ambitious young poet from Paterson, New Jersey, was addressed to William Carlos Williams, an already established poet also from Paterson, New Jersey. Almost one hundred years earlier, in 1856, Whitman had likewise written a letter, which included a first version of *Leaves of Grass*, to Emerson. Ginsberg's letter marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship and mentorship. "Williams got this letter and then wrote back saying, 'I'm going to put this in my book, do you mind?' And I said, 'Gee, I'm going to be immortal,' because I thought he was immortal," Ginsberg recalls (*The Best Minds* 360). The poetry which Ginsberg had included in the letter did not, however, impress Williams, who replied that "in this mode, perfection is basic, and these aren't perfect" (qtd. in Ginsberg "The Tradition of Reznikoff" par. 3).

Not discouraged by Williams' reaction, Ginsberg put together a different set of poems in his following letter. These were often based on dream and journal entries, as the poet had attempted to extrapolate from Williams' lessons and adapt them to his own sensibility and

poetry. Together with the direct treatment of the object, Ginsberg was working with techniques or notions discussed by Williams, such as the observation of particulars, a colloquial style, an interest in the ordinary mind, and an often ludic experimentation with line breaks. The poems in this cluster were enthusiastically received by Williams. Many of these poems, written between 1947 and 1952, would be published with an introduction by Williams in 1961 in the volume *Empty Mirror*.

Discussing an object or phenomena concretely and in detail constituted a significant innovation for Ginsberg, whose early poetry had been heavy with an oblique, opaque symbolism which rendered it hermetic and unintelligible to others. Only Kerouac or intimate friends would occasionally be able to decode Ginsberg's highly personal symbolism, and even the poet himself admitted that he quickly forgot what his symbols stood for (see Raskin 72). This early poetry was profoundly influenced by Blake, whom Ginsberg wanted to emulate, as seen in poems such as "The Eye Altering Alters All" (1948), a short, rhymed epigram for Blake:

Many seek and never see,
 anyone can tell them why.
 O they weep and O they cry
 and never take until they try
 unless they try it in their sleep
 and never some until they die.
 I ask many, they ask me.
 This is a great mystery (1-8).

Some of Ginsberg's *Empty Mirror* poems are crafted and philosophical, and more closely resemble the poet's earlier writing. These poems are often vague and intellectualizing – "I am flesh and blood, but my mind is the focus of much lightning [...] All work has been an imitation of the literary cackle in my head" he admits for instance in "Psalm I" (1949) (2, 5), accentuating a lack of embodiment in his poetry. However, *Empty Mirror* also abounds in poems which foreground the ordinary mind and life, and which observe without imposing interpretation or metaphysical discussion on the observed phenomenon. As its title tells us, for instance, "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour" (1947) depicts a bricklayer eating a sandwich during his break. The poem is highly descriptive: "He / has on dungarees and is bare above / the waist; he has yellow hair and wears /

a smudged but still red cap / on his head” (9-13). There is no judgement or comment imposed on the observation. Towards the end of the poem, “The Bricklayer’s Lunch Hour” operates a shift in perception which opens the space of the piece to a larger perspective:

A small cat walks to him
along the top of the wall. He picks
it up, takes off his cap, and puts it
over the kitten’s body for a moment.
Meanwhile it is darkening as if to rain
and the wind on top of the trees in the
street comes through almost harshly (21-27).

“It’s a jump of attentiveness of the mind from a small thing to awareness of a giant panorama,” explains Ginsberg (*The Best Minds* 369).

Ginsberg’s focus on context at the end of the poem represents another switch from the general and abstract to the concrete and particular, to “no ideas but in things.” As illustrated, this switch to particularity emerged in Ginsberg’s early writing, under the mentorship of Williams. Significantly, Ginsberg’s first letter to Williams shows how, as early as 1950, Ginsberg conceives that his poetry follows Williams’ axiom “no ideas but in things” in different ways, at different levels:

All that I have done has a program, consciously or not,
running on from phase to phase, from the beginnings
of emotional breakdown, to momentary raindrops from
the clouds become corporeal, to a renewal of human
objectivity which I take to be ultimately identical to no
ideas but in things (qtd. in Williams 173).

This assertion holds true throughout his life and work, as Ginsberg reinvents and explores, time and again, this early assertion. This often takes the shape of a progressive embodiment in his poetry. In fact, the poet would continue to progressively move towards an embodiment in writing, an emphasis on concreteness and physicality which manifests, as this paper shows, as both an exploration of the body and an embodiment of his poetry as well, in form: in a coincidence between physicality and line. This paper especially considers two remarkable examples of embodiment and corporeality: *Kaddish* (1961) and poems

from the later collection *Mind Breaths* (1977). In *Kaddish*, physical embodiment is embedded in the poetic verse through the representation of female grotesque physicality. This reflects formally, as the line itself leaks in length and unraveling, reflecting the unboundedness and fluidity of the subject's body and individuality. In poems from *Mind Breaths*, Ginsberg experiments with a new kind of embodiment, one in which consciousness becomes equated with breath. Ultimately, this paper shows how Ginsberg's long line creates and facilitates exchanges between the physical and the formal in the poems, so that the two often coincide.

2. *Kaddish* and the Grotesque, Leaking Long Line

"Look what I have done with the long line," Ginsberg writes in a letter to William Carlos Williams in December 1955, sending him a few poems – *Howl*, "A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley," "A Supermarket in California," and "Sunflower Sutra" – and explaining the latest changes in his writing and theories:

In some of these poems it seems to answer your demand for a relatively absolute line with a fixed base, whatever it is... all held together within the elastic of the breath, thought of varying lengths. The key is in the jazz choruses to some extent; also to reliance on spontaneity & expressiveness which long line encourages; also to attention to interior unchecked logical mental stream. With a long line comes a return, (caused by) expressive human feeling [...] The release of emotion is one with the rhythmical buildup of long line (qtd. in Miles 199).

Although only five years had passed since his first letter to Williams, much had changed in life experience for Ginsberg, who now lived in Berkeley, San Francisco, with Peter Orlovsky. After the *Empty Mirror* poems, Ginsberg's writing had been closely informed by Kerouac's notion of spontaneous writing: "He taught me everything I knew about writing," Ginsberg says, acknowledging Kerouac's influence in those years ("The New Consciousness" 80). Around 1953-54, the poet began experimenting with more spontaneous forms of writing, particularly

inspired by Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1953, first published in 1959).

Under the mentorship of Williams, with a more natural arrangement of form – often with a verse rendition of prose – had come an ordinary, yet visionary, content which prioritized observation over judgement and faithfulness to reality as perceived and to thought as conceived. The most remarkable step in the liberation of form which Ginsberg undertook consisted of the development of the howling long line which poems such as *Howl* and *Kaddish*, together with many other poems from the '50s and '60s, present (see *Howl and Other Poems* and *Kaddish and Other Poems*). Indeed, *Howl* and *Kaddish* are the culmination of Ginsberg's early attempts at spontaneous expression; the line which the poet discovers in writing these pieces would remain the mainstay of his poetic expression. As expressed in his 1955 letter to Williams, the long line enabled Ginsberg to better achieve spontaneity and expressiveness, often through a tuning in with his breath and emotions. It is therefore side by side with his exploration of the long line that Ginsberg embarks on a progressive embodiment, in his poetry, of physical realities and concreteness. The poet's abandonment of abstract, metaphysical lines in favour of an emphasis on the physical and concrete finds expression, this paper shows, in an embodiment of his poetry as well, so that themes which pertain to the body, especially the grotesque body, are reflected in the poet's verse, which duly becomes a grotesque, leaking line.

Kaddish, Ginsberg's elegy for his mother, allows the poet to tap into unhindered emotion and channel it into writing: "I wrote a lot of that weeping anyway, and got idea for huge expandable form of such a poem," he tells Kerouac in a letter (Morgan *The Letters* 171). The expansion in form of this poem, spearheaded by a very long line which is constantly interrupted by multiple dashes, allows for breath, mind, and emotion still further to coincide in the poem. The first lines of the poem immediately establish a rhythm, one which is carried throughout the poem, as the long text is unified by its form and tone; this rhythm is dictated and inspired by the speaker who has been "up all night, talking, talking," and listening to prayer and music:

downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been
up all night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud,

listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the
 phonograph
 the rhythm the rhythm – and your memory in my head
 three years after – And read Adonais' last triumphant
 stanzas aloud – wept, realizing how we suffer –
 And how Death is that remedy all singers dream of, sing,
 remember, prophesy as in the Hebrew Anthem, or the
 Buddhist Book of Answers – and my own imagination
 of a withered leaf – at dawn – (2-4).

The abundance of dashes intuitively suggests an interruption in breath which mirrors the poet's crying while writing, but it also invokes the notion of alluvials, of adding thought-spurts after the main thought is exhausted, when another one comes up, as in "or the Buddhist Book of Answers – and my own imagination of a withered leaf – at dawn" (4). Referring to another poem, "Television Was a Baby Crawling Toward That Deathchamber" ("TV Baby"), Ginsberg recalls his use of commas and dashes in the lines to a similar, orgasmic purpose: "it's like a series of staccato comes, spurts, within the line," he explains; "the breathing there, if read aloud, would be like a heavily labored breathing, with like a gasp for breath after each comma" ("Improvvised Poetics" 22). From the beginning, then, formal elements such as the dash and an interrupted but long line allow the poet to better align the piece to his thought process, emotion, and breathing pattern.

Kaddish's long lines also embed a grotesque physicality which, as the line unravels, underscores an undoing of the poem's subject, Naomi, Ginsberg's mother, in both her body and her mind. The long lines of the poem thereby mirror a movement of fluidity and openness to a grotesqueness which may be equated with Otherness, as it spans femalehood, different states of mind, and monstrous bodies. The elegy focuses on the mother's history of mental illness, beginning with her arrival in the United States, through breakdowns, mental institutions, and ultimately her death. As Loni Reynold notes, Beat Generation writers were part of a historical shift that began in the 1940s, with the institutionalization of mental difference, and continued in the '60s, with the anti-psychiatry movement ("The Mad Ones" 155). While difference was still suspect, the Beats' works would allow for safe identification with it (Reynold 156). Ginsberg also underlines how

difference was considered pathological and treated as an individual ailment, decontextualized from the social, historical moment (Linton “Reassigning Meaning” 162). He argues, as stated in his account of “How *Kaddish* Happened,” that it was not only his mother’s issues he was discussing, but also the “mind-illusion mechano-universe of unfeeling time in which I saw my self my own mother and my very nation trapped desolate our worlds of consciousness homeless and at war” (169). Cold War scholars have indeed noted that, often, the literature of the ‘50s reflects an age of anxiety: the breakdowns, traumas, and neuroses of the characters are national as well as individual (see Alves 2001).

Together with detailing the mental deterioration of his mother, Ginsberg does not shy away from detailing her physical deterioration too, as caused by her hospitalization – “I’m getting fat – I used to have such a beautiful figure before I went to the hospital,” Naomi says on one occasion (147). Her physical breakdowns recount a body which unravels, and becomes entirely grotesque, both in a modern sense and in the Bakhtinian sense. Lines such as these herald an almost complete opening of the body to the world, one in which the individual has no control, no borders, and not even the luck, or mercy, to lose consciousness. Naomi becomes entirely fluid and liquid:

One night, sudden attack – her noise in the bathroom – like croaking up her soul – convulsions and red vomit coming out of her mouth – diarrhea water exploding from her behind – on all fours in front of the toilet – urine running between her legs – left retching on the tile floor smeared with her black feces – unfainted – (140).

The mother’s physicality is consistently represented as monstrous throughout the poem, with an emphasis on the grotesqueness of her body – “varicosed, nude, fat, doomed” and “with your eyes with the pancreas removed / with your eyes of appendix operation [...] of abortion [...] of ovaries removed [...] of shock [...] of lobotomy” (141, 303–08). However, Naomi is doubly monstrous, because of her mental illness as well: as Katherine Kellett notes, following Nuzum, “any individual or group that can be marginalized or viewed as standing outside the norm may be monstrosized” (208).

Naomi's body is specifically rendered monstrous in its sexuality, which borders on incestuous in situations that are grotesque in themselves, as incest constitutes a universal, timeless taboo. In one of what is, significantly, one of the longest lines of *Kaddish*, the speaker recalls the mother attempting to seduce him, and focuses on the grotesqueness of her body and genitals:

One time I thought she was trying to make me come lay her – flirting to herself at sink – lay back on huge bed that filled most of the room, dress up round her hips, big slash of hair, scars of operations, pancreas, belly wounds, abortions, appendix, stitching of incisions pulling down in the fat like hideous thick zippers – ragged long lips between her legs – What, even, smell of asshole? I was cold – later revolted a little, not much – seemed perhaps a good idea to try – know the Monster of the Beginning Womb – Perhaps – that way. Would she care? She needs a lover (158).

In an almost cleansing, purifying act, this line is immediately followed by a prayer uttered in Hebrew: “Yisborach, v’yistabach, v’yispoar, v’yisroman, v’yisnaseh, v’yishador, v’yishalleh, v’yishallol, sh’meh d’kudsho, b’rich hu” (159). Whereas the Oedipal nature of the relationship between Naomi and her son may be highlighted, as related in the poem, *Kaddish* also attempts to rewrite the mother-son roles. In this sense, it follows an impulse antithetical to the Oedipal motive of establishing the father: as Tony Trigilio notes, the speaker aims to essentially reclaim the mother, further redeeming her madness through an analysis of its history and causes (784-85). This attempt to redeem the mother may suggest, indeed, a redemption, on the part of the speaker, of the female principle as well; whereas *Howl* propounds male comradeship, Trigilio suggests, *Kaddish* embodies female divinity (773).

The female grotesque body and mind – liquid, unbound, and dissolved – become then the focus of the long prayer, being depicted in their monstrosity but simultaneously being reclaimed and redeemed. In lines such as these, Naomi is depicted as an unraveling woman: “One hand stiff – heaviness of forties & menopause reduced by one heart stroke, lame now – wrinkles – a scar on her head, the lobotomy – ruin, the hand dipping downwards to death –” (206). *Kaddish*'s long,

prolonged lines reflect the fluid, leaking movements of Naomi towards the world (or, indeed, “dipping downwards to death”), of the speaker towards his mother, and of an invoked openness towards Otherness, including states of mental illness, as found in sections of the poem such as “Hymmn.”

3. *Mind Breaths As Meditative Poetry*

In the 1970s, Ginsberg’s long line became increasingly influenced by and concerned with breath, physiology, and meditative practices. After coming back from a long journey through India and Japan, which concluded with “The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express” (1963), Ginsberg read his works at a poetry conference in Vancouver. His friend and fellow poet Robert Duncan pointed out that he was not using his body as much, in poetry, as he was when chanting mantras; this prompted Ginsberg’s resolve to employ his body more, the more effectively to break “the barrier of fear of energy, or fear of expression” which was obstructing a more complete expression and embodiment of poetry (Ginsberg “First Thought” 106). One way to do this was to value breathing, in composition and expression. After meeting and beginning a long friendship with Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in 1971, Ginsberg starts to experiment more decidedly with oral poetry. The teacher would spur the poet towards extemporaneous composition, often pushing him to improvise on the spot, in both private and public contexts.

Another way in which Ginsberg attempts to foreground physiology in his poetry is through a focus on vocalization, and employing the whole body in his readings. Mantra chanting would become the poet’s cornerstone in any public appearance, and led him directly, almost naturally, into songwriting and singing, via the focus on the articulation of vowels of chanting, as Paul Portugés points out (*The Visionary Poetics* 131). These, together with improvisation, helped him foreground a poetics which increasingly became oral and public. According to Daniel McGuinness, the poet’s long line was apt for this purpose: “The long line, generally, has been traditionally a public line, a symptom of the showman or the shaman, the poet on a raised surface: altar, stage, soapbox” (273). Ginsberg would show an emphasis on poetry as spoken through the use of intentional, rather than stress-based, meter when performing poetry

(as found by Patrick Dunn's study of several performances of Ginsberg's; see Dunn 2007).

Ginsberg would trace this intentional meter back to Ezra Pound. Referring to some tapes he found of Pound reading his poetry, Ginsberg notes how, in Pound's performance, "every syllable is intentional" and the line is condensed to its essential elements: "If you condense it all down to what you mean to say, then you can make a music out of the intentional and significant... syllables. And you can *pay attention to the tone-leading of the vowels*," he remarks; "It's not pay-attention-to-the-tone, but you can pay attention because EACH THING... MEANS... SOME... THING. And that [...] gives a density to the line" ("Improvised Poetics" 32-33, emphases in original). This intentional meter Ginsberg named "vowel-length consciousness," owing to the intentionality and purpose of every syllable in this mode (which he finally equates with good poetry in general) (Ginsberg "Improvised Poetics" 36-37).

Vocalization might be considered another step in the process of externalization and attention to what happens *outside* of the body. As noted in this paper, the poet had begun to develop this focus with poems such as "The Bricklayer's Lunch." Here, he had refrained altogether from judgement or superimposition of thought. This may be seen as already tending towards Buddhist philosophies. In an interview discussing mantra chanting, Ginsberg and Portugés agree that chanting consists of a sort of surrender to the surrounding (empty) space; "surrendering to the inevitability of day or night and seeing other people there," adds Ginsberg (qtd. in Portugés *The Visionary Poetics* 132). Surrendering, and opening, to empty space becomes the norm for the poet: in meditation, in chanting, and in poetry. From 1972, under the guidance of Trungpa, Ginsberg specializes in *samatha* meditation. This consists of the practice of mindfulness, or wakefulness, with the addition of a specific attention to the breath as it leaves the nostrils, moves into the surrounding space, and finally dissolves, beginning anew from the nostrils; in this sense, it is a meditation of egolessness (as it focuses on what happens outside the body, rather than inside) and an exercise in continuous attention (Ginsberg qtd. in Portugés 135-36).

Interestingly, an expansion into space may be considered a characteristic feature of American writing. As Tony Tanner remarks, American authors exhibit a centrifugal movement into surrounding

space which comes from their exposure to a sense of geographical sense of vastness (“Notes for a Comparison” 86). Moreover, the internal differences of the United States also stimulates the writer to expand (through “the wondering vision,” which finds form in the catalogue) into surrounding space as a method of inclusion, the assimilation of variety (Tanner *The Reign of Wonder* 10). Ginsberg’s poems from *Mind Breaths All Over the Place* (1972–1977), as the title of one the collection suggests, reflect exactly such an expansion “all over the place” through breath, meditation, and long lines – and some coincidence between these three. “Mind Breaths” (1973), the title poem, exemplifies thought and lines moving externally, outwards, from the nostrils of the speaker, through the streets outside the window, through the geographical United States, to the other sides of the ocean and every corner of the world, and finally back to the speaker in Teton Village. The poem reflects the exercise in attention which, in meditation, is brought to the breath, its exhalation, movement, dissolution, and new beginning; the poem begins and ends in the same place, in a renewal of attention to the speaker’s physiology.

The poem starts by briefly setting the speaker in place and time and by shifting the focus to his breath. Significantly, this appears to become longer as the lines also progressively become longer throughout the poem. Thus, a first coincidence between line and breath, through length, is established:

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
 [...]
 breathed outward over aspen twigs trembling September’s
 top yellow leaves twilit at mountain foot (1-3, 8).

The first lines employ “I breathed” or “breathed” as anaphora, but after eight lines the word becomes implicit, leaving only the prepositions of place and movement which normally follow the word. The prominent use of these prepositions echoes Whitman’s catalogues, employed by the poet to highlight both an overhead vision and large spans of movement, especially in Section 33 of *Song of Myself*, which contains the longest and most descriptive catalogues of the poem. Anaphoric or repeated words

which Whitman uses throughout Section 33 include “over,” “along,” “by,” “upon,” “at,” “down,” “to,” and “through.” This may be noted, for example, in this extract:

Under Niagara, the cataract falling like a veil over my
countenance,
Upon a door-step, upon the horse-block of hard wood
outside,
Upon the race-course, or enjoying picnics or jigs or a good
game of
base-ball,
At he-festivals, with blackguard gibes, ironical license,
bull-dances,
drinking, laughter,
At the cider-mill tasting the sweets of the brown mash,
sucking the juice through a straw (749-53).

The lines of “Mind Breaths” are similarly descriptive and detailed, but do not continuously use strict anaphora or repetition at the beginning of the line, resulting in a still greater spontaneity:

out towards Reno’s neon, dollar bills skittering downstreet
along the curb,
up into Sierras oak leaves blown down by fall cold chills
over peaktops snowy gales beginning,
a breath of prayer down on Kitkitdizze’s horngreen leaves
close to ground,
over Gary’s tile roof, over Montgomery Street, pigeons
flutter down before sunset from Washington Park’s white
churchsteeple (15-19).

After following the journey of his breath, the poet returns to the first image of the poem, re-setting the time and place; Teton Village, September:

a breath returns vast gliding grass flats cow-dotted into
Jackson Hole, into a corner of the plains,
up the asphalt road and mud parking lot, a breeze of
restless September, up wood stairways in the wind
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 (51-54).

In this way, Ginsberg achieves a coincidence between breath and line not only in the content, but also in the form of the poem. He achieves this through embodying, to some extent, in the length of the line, the length of the breath and through imitating, in the poem, what happens in his breathing meditation: focus originates in the exhalation of breath through the nostrils, moves into the surrounding empty space in Whitmanesque motion of recording catalogue, and comes back to the nostrils with a new breath.

As Stefanie Heine notes, Ginsberg's contention that the length of the thought coincided with the length of the breath in his poetry is problematic, and his theories are often grounded in discourse, rather than in actual physiology (95). In fact, when writing poetry by hand, or on the typewriter, the poet would not have had the chance to overlap the physical need of drawing a breath with the span of the thought, because thoughts may be further prolonged in the mind (93-95). To the purpose of this paper, it is significant to note that, in fact, Ginsberg's own theories contain some contradictions and ultimately unclarified points. For instance, the poet remains ambiguous on whether *Howl's* sentences are strictly breath units or units of thought as well. Luke Walker dives into this matter specifically, pointing out that Ginsberg's theorization contains its own problematization: the 'breath unit' is more of an ideal rather than a practice (45). In his statement on poetics included at the end Allen's *The New American Poetry*, in fact, Ginsberg remarks that "Ideally each line of Howl is a single breath unit. Tho in this recording it's not pronounced so" (416). "My breath is long," he then concedes, "that's the Measure – one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath" (416). It therefore remains rather unspecified whether the poet's idea of a mind-breath unit is to be taken more literally or more metaphorically, as breath or as 'physical-mental inspiration of thought' (Walker 45). In the best cases, these two views seem at least theoretically to coincide: in fact, Ginsberg defines the long line as a form that captures the "great inclusiveness of the mind that can enjamb – put in one breath a great many associations" ("A Conversation" 97).

Another poem in which Ginsberg emphasizes movement in vision, in a manner similar to that of Whitman, is “Thoughts on a Breath” (1975). Here, the poet foregrounds the prepositions of place by removing syntactical elements such as conjunctions, which might hinder the flow, and by predominantly using verbs which indicate movement (such as “slide,” “roll up,” “roll,” and “rise”):

Cars slide minute down asphalt lanes in front of Dallas
Hilton Inn
or roll up toward the city’s squared towers under electric-
wire trestles gridded cross countryed trees brown bare in
December’s smog-mist towards the water tower
distanced under cloud streak crossed with fading vapor
trails.
Majestic rolling in a skirt of human fog, building blocks
rise at sky edge (1-4).

Significantly, “Thoughts on a Breath,” like other poems in *Mind Breaths* such as “News Bulletin” (1973) and “Thoughts Sitting Breathing” (1973), incorporates the news into its lines, as Ginsberg’s poems from the 1960s characteristically did. “Thoughts on a Breath” (1975) depicts a meditating mind angered by current affairs: after describing common meditative practices – “I sat again to complete the cycle, eyes open seeing dust motes in the eye screen” (6) – the speaker’s mind wanders: “What Was it I began my meditation on? // Police state, Students, Poetry open tongue, and the anger and Fear of the Cops, / the oil Cops, the Rockefeller Cops, the Oswald Cops, the Johnson Cops the Nixon Cops the president Cops” (13-15). As in other poems, the mention of orgasm reflects a climax in the poem, here one in which a mounting, overwhelming rage starts to transform into compassion and understanding:

Nothing but massive metal bars about, monster machines
that eat us, Controlled by the army the Cops, the Secret
police, our own thoughts!
Punishment! Punish me! Punish me! we scream in our
hearts, cocks spurting alone in our fists!
What thoughts more flowed thru our hearts alone in
Dallas? (21-23).

The poem then concludes on an elevated, renewed note: “Sentient beings are numberless I vow to liberate all” (53).

“Thoughts Sitting Breathing” is exemplary of the incorporation of the news, or of contemporary, political, and social contexts into an openly spiritual poem. Structurally, this poem comprises three sections, the lines of each of which begin with a syllable from *om manipadmi hum*, a mantra associated with Avalokiteshvara and the path of compassion. With every mantra chanting cycle, the speaker quiets down more and reaches some form of conciliation with the current state of affairs. The first chant is the angriest: an excerpt reads: “OM – the pride of perfumed money [...] MA – How jealous! the million Pentagon myrmidons with dollar billions [...] DMI – alone the misery, the broken legs of carcass alcohol, gimme another cigarette, I ain’t got a dime for coffee,” and “HUM – the pigs got rocks in their head, C.I.A. got one eye bloody mind tongue [...] hate Gook Heaven, hate them hippies in Hell” (1, 2, 5, 6). The second chant transcends the first one and becomes more compassionate or understanding: “OM – Give it all away, poetry bliss & ready cash [...] MA – sit down crosslegged and relax [...] DMI – I forgive thee Cord Meyer secret mind police,” and “HUM – Miserable victims flashing knives” (7, 8, 11, 12).

The third chant further transcends rage and both calls forth and embraces a spiritual elevation, repeating at the end of each line the anaphoric phrase “free space for Causeless Bliss” like a prayer or invocation:

OM – the Crown of Emptiness, relax the skullcap wove
of formal thought, let light escape to Heaven, floating
up from the heart thru cranium, free space for Causeless
Bliss –

MA – Speech purified, worlds calmed of alcoholic luxury
& irritable smoking [...]

NI – How vast, how brightly empty and how old, the
breath within the breast expands threefold, the sigh of no
restraint, sigh love’s release, the rest and peacefulness of
sweetheart’s ease, from Heart to Heart – free space for
Causeless Bliss! (13-15).

This process of self-transcendence in poetry, which the poet primarily achieves through breathing and meditation, was probably inspired by Trungpa's analogy of the telescope. Ginsberg's guru, Trungpa instructed the poet to employ meditation to build on and layer thoughts, comparing the practice to continuously opening a telescope, further enlarging the same image (Schumacher 577). This may clearly be noted in "Thoughts Sitting Breathing," as the repetitive structure of the poem also indicates a repetition in thought which slowly changes each time. The telescope technique may also be noted in "Mind Breaths," as, in the poem, each breath leads the speaker a little further in the world, and each line builds upon the previous one in that it moves both the speaker and the poem further on. Yet another poem in which this effect may be observed is "Ego Confession" (1974). Here, the speaker constantly transcends himself (or rather attempts to transcend himself), with humorous contradiction – "I want to be known as the most brilliant man in America," he begins, later repurposing: "his extraordinary ego, at service of Dharma and completely empty," and "I want to be the spectacle of Poesy triumphant over trickery of the world," – "All empty all for show, all for the sake of Poesy" (1, 14, 18, 31). Another example of this technique is "Teton Village" (1973):

Snow mountain fields
seen through transparent wings
of a fly on the windowpane (1-3).

Like the longer lines of other *Mind Breaths* poems, these lines build upon each other, reflecting an expansion into space of the vision of the speaker which is accompanied by deepening attention and sharper focus. Ultimately, the lines of this collection are "all over the place," literally, as they expand in length and expand into space, coinciding with the poet's breath and consciousness with a new mindful, embodying, transcending quality.

Returning to "Thoughts Sitting Breathing," the third and final mantra cycle of the poem interestingly presents an imagined physical release and liberation in the final syllable of the mantra:

HUM – I shit out my hate thru my asshole, My sphincter
loosens the void, all hell's legions fall thru space, the
Pentagon is destroyed

[...]
 I loose my bowels of Asia
 I move the U.S.A.
 I crap on Dharmakaya
 And wipe the worlds away (18, 23-26).

This adds an element of humorous release to the poem and might also (again humorously) suggest the speaker's own *physical* creation of "free space for causeless bliss," which then becomes a literal as well as metaphysical action. Moreover, the grotesque body might in this case accompany a grotesque individuality just like in *Kaddish*, but on a more positive note: where in *Kaddish* the dissolution of the body was accompanied by the dissolution of identity in the sense of madness, here it is rather related to a dissolution of the self into empty ecstasy, or enlightenment.

Characteristically, grotesqueness and the unraveling of the body are symbolic of processes which occur within the self. This unraveling finds a reflection in form, as these lines break the form of the poem, which was otherwise neatly structured following the syllables of the mantra in three chants, with the use of anaphora at the end of each line in the last cycle. Looseness in the body therefore accompanies looseness in form, in the lines. In these ways, "Thoughts Sitting Breathing," similarly to *Kaddish*, therefore embodies a grotesque physicality in different ways: through expressive form at the end of the poem, in a physical, emotional, and spiritual release, and by cleverly combining form and content in the lines so that the repetition of a mantra accompanies a transcendence in the speaker's mind. Associated with the path of compassion, the Hindu mantra *om manipadmi hum* brings about a renewed compassion in the speaker as he utters and breathes each syllable and each line.

4. The Long Line and Embodiment

"All that I have done has a program, consciously or not, running on from phase to phase," Ginsberg wrote in his letter to Williams in 1950, "from the beginnings of emotional breakdown, to momentary raindrops from the clouds become corporeal, to a renewal of human objectivity which I take to be ultimately identical to no ideas but in things" (qtd. in Williams 173). This statement precedes the composition

of most of the poems published in *Empty Mirror*. However, throughout his life, Ginsberg continued to value Williams' advice and the older poet remained an important influence, as later poems such as "Written in My Dream by W. C. Williams" (1984) suggest. Often, in the more experimental poems of *Empty Mirror*, Ginsberg's lines follow Williams' instruction to find "no ideas but in things" through a direct treatment of the object or phenomena observed, which does not attempt to impose judgement, as in "The Bricklayer's Lunch." These poems exhibit a switch, towards the end, in perception: often, a switch from a smaller, or internal panorama to a larger, or external panorama. This process reminds of the analogy of the opening telescope. In fact, throughout the 1970s, Ginsberg combines the physiological notions of breath and vocalization with his thought as his poetry becomes "expression in really the easiest and most natural way of your own nature, which is by breathing, and making a sound while breathing. Just like the wind makes a sound in the leaves" (Ginsberg "First Thought" 109). His long line expands on the space of the page as breath expands into the surrounding space; following Trungpa's suggestion, like a telescope which opens endlessly. Thoughts and lines build upon each other, layer after layer, as can be seen in "Mind Breaths."

These processes pertain to Ginsberg's continued experiment with embodiment in poetry. Moving beyond the hermetic, disembodied nature of his early poems, he begins, in *Howl* and *Kaddish*, to embody his breath, thought, and emotion in the line, attempting to replicate, in form, breathing patterns apt to convey specific feelings. In *Kaddish*, the physicality described is grotesque, as it depicts the physical and psychological undoing of the poet's mother. The poem's long line embodies physicality in its form, as the line itself leaks, in its length and orgasmic unraveling, reflecting unboundedness and fluidity. *Kaddish*'s lines reflect an unfinished, grotesque nature, which finds embodiment in Naomi's mental and physical conditions. The leaking, unraveling lines accompany the leaking, unraveling body and mind of the mother, and underscore an openness to Otherness and difference which includes female-hood together with mental illness. The Buddhist-inspired *Mind Breaths* poems faithfully follow both the mental and physiological processes of the speaker, replicating these on the page through line length and mindful recording of perceptions. In "Thoughts Sitting Breathing," meditation allows the poet to transcend reality and himself in a final,

humorous grotesqueness which renders both his self and his body wide open. Ultimately, it is specifically Ginsberg's signature expression, the long line, which facilitates exchanges between the physical and the formal in the poem, allowing these, in their most successful moments, to coincide.

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