June 1999

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 35, no.2, June 1999, p.117-128

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Imagism and Allen Ginsberg's Manhattan Locations: The Movement from Spatial Reality to Written Image

By George P. Castellitto

Allen Ginsberg's excursions into the streets of Greenwich Village in the 1950's brought him in contact with a host of specific locations and objects that he catalogues in much of his early poetry. Ginsberg has been labeled as mystic, guru, and howler, but beneath the stark epithets and undaunted vocabulary of his poetry lies his affinity with the early Imagist poets of the twentieth century: William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Amy Lowell. Ginsberg himself admitted that, besides the works of Whitman, Kerouac, and the Bible, "imagist practices" were "immediate resources" for his poetic vision (Muckle 20). Ginsberg perceives the walls of Christine's Polish Restaurant on East Twelfth Street and First Avenue with much the same exactness and avoidance of metaphor as Williams views the particulars of Queen Anne's lace. Ginsberg's "impressive grip on exact description" (Vendler 196) places his work more solidly in the Imagist tradition than he himself would often admit. Williams, in his awareness of the inefficacy of language to portray the specific essentiality of the physical objects of reality, uses his poetry "to assault the Old World with ... learned arrogance" and undermines that world with humility (Rexroth 77-78). Ginsberg similarly assails the world of post-World War II and post-Vietnam War America with portraits of Manhattan locations described in stark language that ultimately is as humble, as distinctive, and as imagistic as Williams' language. This study will discuss the specific Manhattan locations mentioned in a selection of Ginsberg's early and later poems both to highlight Ginsberg's connection to the early Imagist poets and to examine those locations as matrices for Ginsberg's personal vision of the objects of reality as determiners of his spiritual and social quest.

Dan Wakefield, in his description of his visit in 1991 to Ginsberg's walk-up apartment on East Twelfth Street, draws particular attention to the decorations with which Ginsberg surrounds himself, among which are a photograph of Walt Whitman (the cataloguer of visual sights and locations) and a reproduction of Bellini's Saint Francis in Ecstasy about which Ginsberg states to
Wakefield: "I love it because not only Saint Francis but also the animals and even the trees seem to be in this moment of ecstasy. But the ecstasy isn’t some otherworldly experience; it’s more like being awake, like the condition Zen calls ‘ordinary mind’" (Wakefield 182). This is essentially what Ginsberg accomplishes in his Whitmanesque cataloguing of locations in his poetry of the 1950’s (for example, “Howl,” “Kaddish,” “Fragment 1956”), “Mind Breaths,” and the poems from his 1994 volume Cosmopolitan Greetings—relating the epiphanic moments of ecstasy he experiences as he visualizes the ordinary components of various Manhattan locations.

Undeniably, those “moments of ecstasy” that Ginsberg relates in his poems are not necessarily rapturous; they are often expressions of his frustrations, limitations, and sense of rage and powerlessness. There is hardly anything ecstatic about the treatment of the small boy in Theodore Roethke’s imagistic poem “My Papa’s Waltz” in which the boy smells his father’s whiskey breath and experiences his right ear being scraped by a buckle as his father beats time on his head (2442). Roethke has isolated a moment of experience in a series of specific images that relate the particulars of the encounter in its realism and possibility of transcendence. Similarly, Ginsberg’s possibility of transcendence, of “ecstasy,” arises consistently in those poems in which the specific locations are incorporated imagistically as part of his perceptual experience. Ginsberg biographer Thomas Merrill discusses how the “distinctive application of breath to his poetics opened Ginsberg to new creative influences that did not so much reject the teachings of Williams as show him the possibilities beyond them” (24). Ginsberg’s linear exhalations of breath in his poems, as he walks around Greenwich Village and views the particular “things” of the various locations, are his momentary, suspended, imagistic renderings of his perceptions, in non-metaphorical and essential expression, and each exhalation becomes both explicit catalogue of “things” and emanation of Ginsberg’s personal experience. In an interview with Jim Moore in 1995, Ginsberg explains that his work as a photographer complements his poetic vision since both are involved in “noticing the moment and space, the visual moment.... I notice carrying a camera around habitually now, which I’ve done since 1984, I tend to write less in my pocket notebook. I take photographs of things that otherwise I would make verbal descriptions of.” From “Howl” through “The Charnel Ground.” Ginsberg is fundamentally a verse photographer of images, a cataloguer of objects and places, and his method, as he states in the interview, is “not so much an impulse” but rather “a method which is very specific,” a combination of observation and “being a stenographer of [his] own mind.”

The photographic and stenographic approach that Ginsberg describes is a reworking of the principles of Imagism outlined in the 1915 volume of Some Imagist Poets whose contributors (among whom were Amy Lowell and H. D.) defined imagist verse as the presentation of an image employing the
exact word, creation of new rhythms, and the presentation of a subject with both clarity and absolute freedom (Coffman 28-29). Though Ginsberg is often accused of ignoring the element of concentration so noticeable in most Imagist poetry, nevertheless his Whitman-like practice of cataloguing exactly what he perceives is comparable to what the Imagists accomplish. If, indeed, the purpose of Imagist verse is to elicit emotion, then the poetic results of Ginsberg’s Manhattan meanderings are the expression of his personal reactions to the “things” in the city, responses that arise from both his verse photography of exact locations and his individual, psychic stenography. For the Imagist poet, “emotional experience ... is stimulated by some occurrence in nature” and expressed in exact language that is representational of the stimulus producing the emotion (Gage 3). It is in the process of representation that the Imagists discover inconsistencies because of the difference between the reality of the stimulus, the object being represented, and the reality of the language depicting that object (Gage 3). In describing how he wrote “In a Station of the Metro,” Ezra Pound uses the word “equation” to express the process of representation by saying that:

The “equation” technique to depict the images accurately and to evoke appropriate emotion is a more effectual imagistic approach to solving the problem of the divergence between the reality of the “thing” and the reality of the words being used to represent the thing. Ginsberg’s poems in which the various Manhattan locations are catalogued are indeed equations that mediate the reality of the urban landscapes and the reality of descriptive language; his poems are sprawling and stark delineations of his perceptual experience in which he utilizes nonrepresentational words both to depict exactly what he sees and to present an equation for his perceptual reactions. Ginsberg’s approach accomplishes what Karl Malkoff describes in his definition of Imagism:

What is most important is that the poet must not talk about the perception, but rather create a structure that will allow the reader to experience it himself. This constitutes a rejection of the conscious intellect as a legitimate mediator of experience. The ego, instead of being asked to perform its traditional function of shaping reality, is being asked to step aside so that reality may be experienced directly. (38)

Even in its subjectivism and biographical exposition, Ginsberg’s location poetry becomes equational, with Ginsberg’s ego functioning as perceiver rather than shaper of the specifics of the locations. Asserting that Ginsberg’s approach is imagistic is indeed not new, but scholars tend to concentrate on the Manhattan locations as components of his Whitman-like, wandering, mystical vision rather than as matrices for his conception of reality.
The essentials of Ginsberg’s vision, his attempt to utilize the jazz rhythm of the “long breath” to represent his perceptions through equational language, are apparent in “Howl” where his renderings of locations are direct and specific: “neon blinking traffic light,” “endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx,” “drear light of Zoo,” “submarine light of Bickford’s,” “platonic conversation-alists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State,” and the “yacketayakking screaming vomiting” (10-11).

Louis Simpson states: “Ginsberg objected to people who spoke to him about ‘morals and society’—he wanted the poem to be read for its technique.... The trouble with ‘Howl’ is that it is so little a work of imagination and so much an expression of Ginsberg’s opinions” (74). Simpson sees “Howl” as replete with moral attitudes, but he does not distinguish between mere moralizing and Ginsberg’s imagistic tendency to employ the locations as starting points for the expression of his opinions; the “moralizing” is accomplished through the initial perception of the “things” of the locations. There is no difference between Ginsberg’s expression of opinion in “Howl” and Williams’ articulation in “This is Just to Say” in which he expresses that the devoured plums “were delicious / so sweet / and so cold” (55). Just as Williams forces the reader to peer into the icebox with the persona to visualize the plums and then share with the persona the taste of the fruit, so does Ginsberg compel the reader to perceive with him the particulars of the Manhattan locations in “Howl” and experience his emotion. In commenting on “Notes on Howl,” Thomas Merrill describes the process by which Ginsberg chooses objects in locations to verify his emotions:

He begins with a feeling ... that develops into something like a sigh. Then he looks around for the object that is making him sigh; then he “sigh[s] in words.” At best, he goes on, he finds a word or several words that become key to the feeling, and he builds on them to complete the statement. (57-58)

Here Ginsberg admits that his emotion is derived from the object as its source. Admittedly, he does not adhere staunchly to the Williams edict “no idea about the thing but the thing itself,” but “This is Just to Say” demonstrates that neither does Williams; the image becomes the source of the poet’s or persona’s feelings, whether they be the sense of isolation about the ruination of a generation or the deliciousness of a piece of fruit.

Ginsberg’s autobiographical and mystical “Kaddish,” his lament over the death of his mother Naomi, is recognized as his Blake vision (Merrill 75), his confessional attack on the “conscious and rational self” (Malkoff 141), his elegy for the death of his own childhood (Watson 278), and his personal excursion into his own soul through meditation on the particulars of his mother’s and his own mental illness. In November of 1957, Ginsberg sat in the Café Select and composed the first draft of “Kaddish”; in his East Second Street apartment which he shared with Peter Orlovsky, he wrote the drafts of the poem’s major sections: “Proem,” “Narrative,” and “Hymmnn” (Ball 334, 348). In his discussion of “Kaddish,” Louis Simpson quotes Ginsberg: “Trusting that if my heart-mind is shapely, the objects or words, the word
sequences, the sentences, the lines, the song, will also be shapely” (78). “Kaddish” is indeed an imagistic potpourri of objects from Manhattan locations that become the physical pavement for Ginsberg’s ruminations. His thoughts of his mother emanate from his Whitmanesque walking around New York:

Strange to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I
walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.
downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon...
It leaps about me, as I go out and walk the street, look back over
my shoulder, Seventh Avenue, the battlements of window
office buildings shouldering each other high, under a cloud,
tall as the sky an instant—and the sky above—an old blue
place.
or down the Avenue to the South, to—as I walk toward the Lower
East Side … (Beat Reader 77-78)

The images that Ginsberg positions in these lines are the stimuli for his memory and emotion (much like the plums in Williams’ poem are the catalysts for his memory of taste), and it is from the suspended, specific objects of these locations that Ginsberg embarks on his journey of self-discovery, toward his reminiscences of “education marriage nervous breakdown, operation, teaching school, and learning to be mad” (78).

Ginsberg’s “Fragment 1956” from Reality Sandwiches is his song to “the natural pathos of the human soul” (51), and his distinct memories of Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Herbert Huncke emerge from his memory of a “streetlight 8th Avenue & 27th / Street 1947” (51). Similarly, his memories of overcoat thief and addict Bill Garver (Ball 175) arise from his perception in “Back on Times Square, Dreaming of Times Square” of the particulars of the location: “memorial of ten years, at 5 AM, with / the thin white moon just / visible / above the green & grooking McGraw / Hill offices / a cop walks by…” (Reality Sandwiches 70). Ginsberg’s reflections in these poems begin with the apprehension of the “things” in the locations and move him to consciousness of self and other. The objects of the locations are not simply components of a mystical, memory-oriented vision that overtakes Ginsberg; they are the roots and catalysts of his consciousness. The same process occurs in “My Sad Self,” a poem filled with precise, imagistic descriptions of the particulars of the location:

Sometimes when my eyes are red
I go up on top of the RCA Building
and gaze at my world, Manhattan—
my buildings, streets I’ve done feats in,
lofts, beds, coldwater flats
—on Fifth Ave below, which I also bear in mind,
its ant cars, little yellow taxis, men
walking the size of specks of wool—
Panorama of the bridges, sunrise over Brooklyn machine,
sun go down over New Jersey where I was born
& Paterson where I played with ants
my later loves on 15th Street,
my greater loves of Lower East Side,
my once fabulous amours in the Bronx
faraway—
paths crossing these hidden streets,
my history summed up… (Reality Sandwiches 72)

With precision in perception and exactness in poetic rendering, Ginsberg informs us that his psychic history is summed up in the images sprawling beneath him. Later in the poem, his stroll on the pavement brings him in contact with images of “plateglass,” “an automobile shopwindow,” and “traffic moving up and down 5th Avenue blocks” (72-73). Essentially, his melancholy issues not simply from his consciousness of the disharmony in the city, but also from his sensibility to the images that surround him; even in his discernment of “the timeless sadness of existence” lies a celebration of the “things” in the location, for there is a “tenderness flowing thru the buildings” (73).

In “Mind Breaths” and “Mugging,” two poems from the volume Mind Breaths (1972-1977), Ginsberg’s execution of details in his description of locales becomes his parchment for the merging of image and imagination, object and humor. “Mind Breaths” is a catalogue of the singularities of locations across the country, a progress from perception to meditation, and the “calm breath … silent breath … slow breath” (31) that emerges in the poem’s final line results from the memory of his breathing within the lists of locations among which he includes the fluttering of “pigeons … before sunset from Washington Park’s white churchsteeple” (28). “Mugging” is a richly detailed poem in the imagistic vein in which the failure of Ginsberg’s mantra incantation “Om Ah Hum” during the incident does not diminish his assertion that both the assault and the indifference of the adolescent onlookers inextricably reside in the particulars of the physicality of his East Side neighborhood. It is through the details of that locality, from his walk “out of [his] red apartment door on East tenth street’s dusk” (49) to his vision at the poem’s end of the “old lady with frayed paper bags,” that Ginsberg defines the experience. Thomas Merrill asserts: “Street description is a choric element in this poem. Before the mugging, the visual details, despite the urban blight, are vivid and engaging” (127). Ginsberg employs those details to place the reader experientially within the location in true imagistic fashion:

Tonite at seven walked past garbage cans chained to concrete anchors
Walked under black painted fire escapes, giant castiron plate
covering a hole in the ground
—Crossed the street, traffic lite red, thirteen bus roaring by
liquor store,
past corner pharmacy iron grated, past Coca Cola & My-Lai
posters fading scraped on brick
Past Chinese Laundry wood door’d, & broke cement stoop
steps for Rent hall painted green & purple Puerto Rican style
Along E. 10th’s glass spattered pavement, kids black & Spanish
oiled hair adolescents’ crowded house fronts … (49)
“Mugging” is an effective example of Ginsberg’s imagistic employment of exact, concrete words, rhythmically rendered, to display the essential “thingness” of a location; any presumptions that the reader makes about Ginsberg’s response to the incident must be derived wholly from the images, for the poem distinctly lacks any specific moralizing or sentimental lamentation. Even his epithet “O hopeless city of idiots empty eyed staring afraid” (52) is more a verbal response to what he sees than a condemnation of human apathy.

More than thirty years after the publication of *Howl*, *Cosmopolitan Greetings* (1986-1992) manifests the same imagistic approach to the specific objects of the locations surrounding Ginsberg’s apartment on East Twelfth Street. Christine’s Polish Restaurant on East Twelfth Street and First Avenue, Kiev Restaurant on Second Avenue, KK’s Polish Restaurant, Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic church on Fourteenth Street, and other Stuyvesant Town locations become the physical bases for Ginsberg’s meditations and ruminations. In “Hard Labor,” after a meal containing “horseradish Beef” and “Kasha Mushrooms” at the Kiev Restaurant, Ginsberg confronts his memory, his politics, and his sexuality under “the transsexual fluorescent light of Kiev / Restaurant after a hard day’s work” (6). It is interesting that, in the poems of this volume, Ginsberg reasserts the significance of the distinct “things” of the locations and the particulars of his perception of them (form, time, and place) by adding the month, day, year, and exact time after many of the poems. He celebrates the value of poetry amidst the cold pragmatism of the mounting National Debt in “Velocity of Money” that “whistles through the windows of Lower East Side” while “delighted skyscrapers rise grungy apartments fall on 84th Street’s pavement” (7). Ginsberg employs the image of the “crowds of joggers down Broadway past City Hall on the way to the Fed” to portray his sense of distance from the underlying meaning of the joggers’ actions (“everybody running after the rising dollar”) and his affirmation of the divergence between the inutile movement and velocity of money and the unmoving but nevertheless significant composition of the “things” he perceives as he walks. The cataloguing of locations that Ginsberg initiated in his earlier poetry continues in intensity in these later poems; he furnishes the formula in “Cosmopolitan Greetings” for appropriate imagistic perception:

Ordinary mind includes eternal perceptions.
Observe what’s vivid.
Notice what you notice....
Two molecules clanking against each other require an observer to become scientific data....
We are observer, measuring instrument, eye, subject, Person....
Maximum information, minimum number of syllables. (12-13)

Ginsberg’s reflection on his own mortality in “May Days 1988” literally adheres to the maxims he proposes above; from his rising and walking across his kitchen floor in the poem’s first line through his listing of his possessions in his apartment, he utilizes the essentials of his perception as the matrix for
his musing. His life is composed literally of the “things” surrounding him: the view of “Mary Help of Christians R. C. Church” across the street, the garbage pail, the walk to the sidewalk with the black plastic bag, the pigeons fluttering from the street light to the iron fence, his “oatmeal cooking in an iron pot” while he sits in a wooden chair and chooses a soupspoon (37). After the cataloguing of the objects in his apartment, Ginsberg makes specific visits to Christine’s Polish restaurant and a “taxi uptown to art museums or visit Dr. Brown” before his return to his rooms. Christine’s is Ginsberg’s “favorite neighborhood restaurant … an old-fashioned luncheonette which Ginsberg claims is ‘an institution around here for hungry rock ’n’ roll musicians’” (Wakefield 188). A visitor to Christine’s would observe nothing extraordinary about the site and would note that its simplicity and commonality are its most distinguishing characteristics. Ginsberg’s perceptual immersion into the essential, simplistic presence of the ordinary objects of his daily landscapes gives his poetry structure and an imagistic sense of conciseness and exactness. The “pajamas in drawer for sleep” and the “80 volumes behind the headboard for browsing” are the “things” that provide “riches for old age” (38). Ginsberg has transformed himself through his perceptions of things much as does Crispin in Wallace Stevens’ “The Comedian as the Letter C”; both have discovered “a nice shady home,” and like Crispin, Ginsberg strolls “in the presto of the morning … / Each day still curious, but in a round / Less prickly and much more condign than that / He once thought necessary” (Stevens 42). In “I Went to the Movie of Life,” Ginsberg utilizes the movie image, a paradigm for seated observation of specific flickerings and a fitting vehicle for representation of visual images, to surround himself with memories of past journeys, of the locations of past companions Neal Cassady, Ken Kesey, and Bob Dylan, and those recollections revolve around distinct objects and culminate in his presence in the “nice shady home” of his apartment with his awakening “at dawn New York wood-slatted venetian blinds over / the windows on E. 12th St. in my white painted room” (23).

In his naming of both individuals and places, Ginsberg is attempting to move past Wordsworthian notions of the “ordinary” and the Emersonian conception of universal connectedness to a post-Williams “intimacy with the common, the average, the representative” (Muckle 17). Steven Watson declares that “Ginsberg’s new style shared some of the characteristics of Imagism” (129). Actually, Ginsberg’s poetic technique is intensely imagistic in its concentration on specifics and utilization of locations. Invariably, because of Ginsberg’s sense of spirituality and mysticism, his imagism is addressed in terms of its divergence from established Imagistic maxims rather than its consistent adherence to those apothegms of direct treatment of the “thing” and selection of the exact word presented rhythmically. Williams scholars recognize the paradoxical characteristics of his philosophy about “things”; embedded in a “belief in the value of common things [is] spiritual truth … derived from involvement with them … [for] the word is both win-
dow and object, and through that tension is opened up the gap within the
sign, between signifier and signified” (Muckle 29). Ginsberg wrestles with
this “gap within the sign” through his excursions into and naming of the vari­
ous Manhattan locations; from the mentioning of the things present in each
location (especially in the unadorned way in which each location is included
as part of the perceptual and personal experience of each poem), Ginsberg
progresses past Whitman and past Williams to the logical and valid expres­
sion of where exactly, in a psychic and intellectual sense, “things” should
lead the perceiver—ultimately back to the location where the perception of
the “things” originated. Helen Vendler characterizes Ginsberg’s later preoc­
cupation with locations as a weakness in which, she claims, “the minute par­
ticulare of mankind seem to be vanishing … in favor of the minute particulars
of geography” (199). However, in the specificity of his geographical posi­
tioning, Ginsberg is attempting to connect himself as perceiver/signifier to
the things perceived in a manner that both transcends Williams’ approach and
manifests the personal experience and ideological stances that arise logically
from the discernment of the objects of a location.

In “N.S.A. Dope Calypso,” a seemingly non-imagistic treatise about
cocaine traffic and corruption, Ginsberg’s political assertions are coalesced
in the poem’s final simile comparing the particulars of international drug
wars to the “coke fiends fighting on St. Marks & First” (59). His philosophical
disquisition on the indiscriminate nature of death in “The Charnel Ground”
is effected through the actions that he perceives in a number of locations: the
“meth head” yowling up and down East Twelfth Street, “kicked out of
Christine’s Eatery till police cornered him, ‘top a hot iron steamhole / near
Stuyvesant Town Avenue A telephone booth” and the “southwest corner
where art yuppies come out of the overpriced Japanese Sushi Bar—& they
poured salt into potato soup heart failure vats at KK’s Polish restaurant” (97).

The passing of the M14 bus and the “heavy dressed senior citizens … with
Reduced Fare Program cards” (98) become the images that remind him
of global and local suffering and death (“News comes on the radio, they bomb
Baghdad … / A million starve in Sudan, mountains of eats stacked on
docks … / wheat piles shoved by bulldozers”), and he offers an unnamed
individual “a quarter by the Catholic church 14th St.” (98). Ginsberg is deft at
detecting in the panorama of “things” present in a particular location both the
simplistic and unadorned essence of those objects and the ideas that those
things signify. In a journal entry on December 21, 1956, almost an echo of
Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” Ginsberg states: “Strange faces in the
subway—the minute I sat down I realized I had power to see them straight in
the eye and dig the eternal moment’s mask—as they ride by dreaming rocked
in the dark with neon on their faces” (Ball 321). Ginsberg’s ability to delve
into various situations by capturing the essentials of a location through his
particular perception is indeed a digging of the “eternal moment’s mask,” and
his power lies in his ability to employ those momentary visions of those loca-
tions as links between the physical reality of the objects of each location and
the universal, human, and autobiographical experiences inherent in the
“things” he catalogues.

The poetry of Ginsberg and the Beat poets entails more than revolt against
social and literary conventions, more than autobiographical “snatches of
remembered conversations” transformed into “idiosyncratic narratives ... 
d dictated from an uncensored consciousness,” and more than the basis for the
cultural revolutions of the 1960’s hippies and the 1970’s punks (Watson 5-6).
In its unwavering personalism and expressionism, the work of the Beats
exhibits a fierce insight into the particulars of reality coupled with an often
waver ing but consistently present sense of idealism. When Ginsberg utilizes
specific locations in his poems to portray his sensory perceptions and philo-
sophical stances, he is Imagist poet in both practice and disposition. His cata-
loguing of sites in “Howl” or “The Charnel Ground” accomplishes what
Williams achieves in “Burning the Christmas Greens”; the “ja gged flames
green / to red, instant and alive” (111), leap in vivid testimony to the physical
reality of holiday adornment and to the memory of decoration, now translated
from construct to concept, and Williams captures the moment of that translation.
Similarly, Ginsberg apprehends a host of “moments” shifting from per-
ception of “thing” to conceptualization; the locations in his poems become
the points of origin of his vision, much like the green and red flames spring-
ing up and transforming from physical logs and twigs burning to developing
impression and established ideology. Ginsberg’s posture as wanderer, seer,
and cataloguer is not different from the reclining pose of the woman in
Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” who surrounds herself with physical objects in
her domicile, perceives them, and moves to contemplation of a “deity.”

Ginsberg’s journey through locations is much like the stroll of the walking
woman in Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West” whose perception of the
sea, intermingling with her creative attempt at song, merges her as seer with
the waves. Ginsberg’s discernment of the particulars of Manhattan locations
is similar to that of the female persona in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s Sonnets
from an Ungrafted Tree whose perceptions of the objects in her kitchen for-
mulate her attitudes toward love and relationships. The creative expression
and freedom from restraint so often associated with the Beats, and Ginsberg
in particular, discover their source in the ability of the poets to connect them-
selves with the particular images of the landscapes surrounding them.
Ginsberg’s initial viewing of these landscapes becomes a “transformation of
the actual and the ordinary into poetry” through a series of documented
records portraying “moments when his private feelings intersect with public
or political matters” (Foster 95, 107). Ginsberg’s use of concrete images, his
affinity with Williams and Pound, and the influence of Emersonian expres-
sionism and Whitmanesque cataloguing on his poetics have all been dis-
cussed at length, but the significance of the locations as bases for Ginsberg’s
vision has been given only limited scholarly attention over the last twenty
years.
In poem 40 of *Tribute to the Angels*, H. D. declares: "This is no rune nor symbol / what I mean is—it is so simple / yet no trick of the pen or brush / could capture that impression" (106). Ginsberg's employment of spatial images from Manhattan locations to address his concerns is indeed imagistic in its directness, objective portrayal, and avoidance of metaphorical posturing, and, despite characterizations of his poetry as confluent, unstructured gathering of thing and idea, he uses no "tricks" to display what he sees. Ginsberg may have sometimes found the particulars of the locations to be overwhelmingly stark and caustic, but, nevertheless, he consistently reports what he discerns. Often, as Diane DiPrima proclaims in "Three Laments," "the chairs / in the library / were too hard" (*Beat Reader* 360), with the possibility of a Williams-like conflagration of Christmas greens looming before him, but Ginsberg invariably manages to recount accurately what he perceives as he sits in his Greenwich Village apartment or strolls through the streets of Manhattan. Kenneth Rexroth declares that Ginsberg "read *Howl* and started an epoch" (141); that era becomes the reintroduction and solidification of imagistic principles that found their roots in 1915.

Works Cited


