

Ginsberg: The trees are our allies

Allen Ginsberg
David Gaynes

1969

Editors' Note: this interview with poet Allen Ginsberg took place at 10 a.m. on October 15 while driving from Detroit's inner city to Macomb College, where he was reading. Ginsberg was in the area doing a series of readings for the John Sinclair Defense Fund and a benefit for the Ann Arbor Argus.

Fifth Estate: What place does poetry have in the United States, at the present time, in connection with the movement?

Allen Ginsberg: Well, what's going on in America is much larger than what's going on in the movement. What's going on is a lot of trees growing and plants moving around and crows eating grass, which is more important than anything. So poetry is just part of the same natural order, which is it's just like speech, peace of speech, and so it's just more coherent speech.

So, if coherent speech has any place in the larger natural movement that's going on, including the sun and the stars and people growing up, then it has got the same old place it always had, and as for the movement, it can stick its preoccupations with what place anything has up its own ass.

Fifth Estate: Do you think that poetry is playing an important role in creating social awareness?

Allen Ginsberg: No, I don't think it is.

Fifth Estate: Do you think that more people read poetry today, or say, in the last ten or fifteen years, than ever before?

Allen Ginsberg: No, less if anything. There's more poetry being read on account of the doubling of the population, but more people listen to it in song. they don't read it.

Fifth Estate: Then you've noticed a decline in the reading of poetry?

Allen Ginsberg: Yeah. I think less people sit down in an attic and read.

Fifth Estate: Because the most easily accessible poetry is contained in music?

Allen Ginsberg: because people look at television instead of reading. I don't hardly read any more.

Fifth Estate: Do you think that rock music is the new poetry as far as young people are concerned?

Allen Ginsberg: Well, yes, with the Beatles', "I Am A Walrus," and some of Dylan's lyrics. It returns to the old poetry which is minstrelsy.

Fifth Estate: Do you think that young people are taking it as minstrelsy?

Allen Ginsberg: Well. I think it's being used in the same way that minstrelsy was being used. Like, the bard used to be the cat who went around from valley to valley getting the news and rhyming it up and telling everybody. The bardic tradition is the ancient oral newspaper before they had moveable type and so, like now, song is a source of information and news about which way the wind is blowing.

Fifth Estate: What purpose do you think your poetry serves?

Allen Ginsberg: I don't know anymore. I just feel as if I'm getting up and bullshitting to myself. At least at this hour of the morning that's how it feels like.

Fifth Estate: What did it feel like last night when you filled up Community Arts Auditorium?

Allen Ginsberg: More of, like, one old lone man talking to himself, other people overhearing. and to the extent that his speech was accurate and honest, one man felt like anybody else, everybody else. But it didn't have any social conclusions or propositions to it, finally. There's no system at the end. What'd we begin with, let's go back to there.

Fifth Estate: All right, what place poetry has in connection with the movement in America today.

Allen Ginsberg: Here's what I'm bridleing about is that what is happening socially now, here in Detroit, right now, is being called the movement is a little wavelet on a larger awareness that's growing in people, which is a biological awareness rather than a political awareness. Or another kind of politics is slowly emerging which is indistinguishable from biology or ecology and that ideological politics, ideological Marxist politics has become completely bankrupted along with capitalism in the biological crisis that's overtaken the planet.

So there's a threat to the existence of the entire planet, so when you ask the question what place has poetry in the social revolution that's taking place now, I begin bridleing. I begin cursing because it's like putting everybody's understanding back in the thirties, in a way, when everybody was arguing whether or not the poet should be responsible socially.

This is an argument that ultimately wound up whether or not the poet was responsible to the Central Committee of the Communist Party for a proper articulation of the needs and desires and logical ideology of the masses. And that, as Chairman Mao has repeatedly said, the poet must stand up and take criticism from the Communist Party and because the Communist Party is the will of the people.

Therefore, since the poet must be responsible to the will of the people he must be responsible logically to the Communist Party and therefore, if they tell him to fuck off, he's got to fuck off. So, in other words, the terminology of the question you asked, that same terminology seems dated and that's why I was being so creepy in my answer.

The creepiness of my answer did sneak in some reference to biology. I don't think the movement as it is known here is yet ecologically oriented and biologically conscious or complete and, therefore, the movement is full of shit.

Fifth Estate: The movement as it is here in Detroit?

Allen Ginsberg: Everywhere in the United States, everywhere the whole movement, in the United States and Cuba and Russia and China, everywhere, the whole revolutionary movement is not yet into the realization of the fact that man's material grasping is actually destroying other species and it's actually beginning to threaten the existence of the planet itself.

As Gary Snyder points out, the exploited masses are not just blacks and hippies and the Chinese, the exploited masses are the trees and the fish in the sea, those are the exploited masses, the rest of the sentient beings on the planet. So I think we need things like Snyder's "Smokey Bear Sutra," and then they've got a new thing called "The Declaration of Interdependence," which was just put out by a whole gang of ecology action people on the west coast, that are sympathetic enough to include the whole planet and not just the human contingent.

Fifth Estate: Why is it that the section of the movement that has ecology as its roots, is based on the west coast?

Allen Ginsberg: Because everybody here is so covered with machinery and smog that they have forgotten that nature even exists. Quite literally, here people have become so divorced from the bio-system of the planet, especially here in Detroit, the center of mechanization, that they literally have forgotten that they are part of a larger, interdependent, harmonic, organic system. They've got mountains out there so you can always go out in the mountains and realize that mountains are bigger than cities, that the back country is much much vaster than the places the humans have filled up.

Fifth Estate: Well. what effect do you think ecology oriented poets like Gary Snyder and Diane di Prima are having on the people as far as changing these things goes?

Allen Ginsberg: I don't like the phrase "the people." Who is the people, who is the people, who the fuck is the people? I keep bridleing over this political terminology. Who is the people? What does that mean?

Fifth Estate: Well the people who are capable of changing things or setting the world straight, because the trees certainly can't do it by themselves.

Allen Ginsberg: The trees are the only ones who are getting the world straight. They're the ones who are producing the oxygen we are consuming, the trees are like the oxygen factories of the atmosphere. The trees are our biggest allies. If the enemy is the materialistic, consumer oriented, predatory, acquisitive capitalistic, manufac-

turing society which is consuming all our natural resources at a suicidal rate, our natural allies in this battle for survival are the trees and the grass.

I think what is happening is that the ecology oriented people are articulating clearly what everybody unconsciously realizes, including the capitalists, what everybody is unconsciously realizing. But it is just too large and apocalyptic and horrible to realize into consciousness that we are in, perhaps, the death throes of the planet and that the planet may be finished unless we take some immediate measures, unless we're aware of the fact that we're a threat to the planet. Lake Erie is poisoned.

Fifth Estate: Does the poet have any place in turning peoples' eyes to these facts?

Allen Ginsberg: Well, not ordained by God, but it's just common sense I guess that poets have always been running around in the woods and spouting out about nature so, yeah, sure, they'd be the first ones to be sensitive when nature gets shat all over. It is shit because it is just the waste product, thoroughly machine shit, the shit of robots, even brown colored, in a gaseous form, robot farts.

Fifth Estate: Does poetry have any importance beyond ecology. I mean, why is it that the state is constantly busting poets like John Sinclair, LeRoi Jones, you, and in some cases, even driving them to suicide as with d.a. levy?

Allen Ginsberg: Or Brody, Alexi Ginzburg, Yesamen Volpin or all the poets in China they fucked in the ass, too. I hate Mao Tse-Tung. His literary criticism is the worst of the new criticism that has escaped, worse than Alan Tate.

Well, mainly they bust poets because I don't think poets are intimidated by authority. If they've reported their unconscious correctly, if they're measuring their unconscious accurately, then you are getting an unconditioned report on what you're actually thinking and feeling rather than a partial report on what you think you're supposed to feel and think as dictated by politicians of any side.

Anyway, all politics is, in a sense, is poetry in the sense that it's hypnotic imagery being laid out like the domino theory, which is a two word phrase that entered people's brains and got them hypnotized and it's all public communications now...the imagery, television, and language that goes along with it. So it's all made up, selected, edited, made up compositions and that's what poetry is...compositions that you make up out of your brain from language or painting pictures. So that a Frankenstein picture of China which requires people to put up an ABM system is just a piece of bad poetry, like, in other words, a whole political language is also poetry, is just bad poetry. In other words, a whole political language is also poetry, is just bad poetry in the sense that it's made up pictures. It's a question of what composition has the most information and is the most revealing and is the most accurate. A hysterical composition by the police blaming outside agitators for violence or blaming conspirators for what's wrong is like a second rate poem, or a second rate generalization, just like Abbie Hoffman or Jerry Rubin talking about the Chicago 8 trial being theater. It is all theater, the Democratic convention was theater, like the Living Theater theater.

Fifth Estate: What do you think of violence as a means for change? I mean, do you feel there's a time when its use is necessary or acceptable?

Allen Ginsberg: Once a question like that is posed, it then becomes unanswerable. That's like something Burroughs said the other day, "Once a problem is posed, it becomes insoluble." There's no answer, I mean I don't have an answer for that, all I know is that I get violently angry, but I know every time I do, I pay for it because I usually hit the wrong person, like at the beginning of this interview I was violently angry, but I don't even know who I was being angry at, so I took it out on you. So most violence I've seen has been bullshit.

Fifth Estate: Can you rationalize it as self-defense ever?

Allen Ginsberg: Well, I've never been in a situation where violent fisticuffs, guns or self-defense was more effective than other means. There are always other means that were more effective, I've found. But it requires training in other means, just as self-defense requires training in karate. In Chicago, had they had classes in rhythmic behavior, mantra chanting and organized body movements, the first day of the Convention would have sent a message much more sympathetic and interesting to the world at large through the public imagery than they did when they sent the snake dance karate image.

They would have averted violent conspiracy evidence in the trial and they would have trained people for something useful because the karate class in this case was neither used nor useful. It was just a lot of bullshit. It was never put into use anyway, it was just a theatrical gesture.

The rationalization for it at the time was that it was absolutely practically necessary that they be trained precisely in that way, for physical combat contact. Well, it wasn't—it was just hysterical. And the guys who were run-

ning it agreed, later anyway. It would have been more effective in terms of street tactics had they spent a day teaching people mantras, because the mantras were used a little, at least, and the karate never was—so violence only leads to more violence, it's a big drag, egotistical, like with the police, but the violence is already set forth and so escalated in every direction and everybody is so insistent on having their own way that I suppose that it's going to take place.

There's no way out of it. The Jews are going to stomp all over Sinai, and the Arabs are going to cut the Jews' throats; hippies are going to cut the cops' throats and the cops are going to cut the hippies' throats... great... the narcs are going to cut the mystics' throats.

Fifth Estate: Where's it all going to stop?

Allen Ginsberg: Burroughs says the planet's finished. As to whether or not it is?

Recorded and Transcribed by David Fraser

Related

See "Conversations with Allen Ginsberg: Two interviews," FE #350, Fall, 1997. The second interview is a condensed version of the interview above.

fifth Estate

Allen Ginsberg
David Gaynes
Ginsberg: The trees are our allies
1969

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/91-october-30-november-12-1969/ginsberg-the-trees-are-our-allies>
Fifth Estate #91, October 30-November 12, 1969

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)