

Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics by Tony Trigilio. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007.

\$45

Allen Ginsberg's *Moloch*, like Blake's *Urizen*, symbolizes a mechanistic mentality that shuts down our embodied experiences of compassion, creativity, and love. It is this disembodiment of human consciousness that the Beats in general and Ginsberg in particular countered in their respective arts. As Tony Trigilio points out in his important study of Ginsberg's middle and later poetics, Buddhism played a significant role in the poet's development of what he terms Ginsberg's "embodied poetics of possibility" (128).

Trigilio's argument is that "Ginsberg's struggle with Buddhism is central to understanding his post-'Kaddish' visionary work; and only through an understanding of his maturation as a Buddhist can we consider the scope of his career in detail" (xi). Since the 1960s, there have been intermittent studies of Buddhist themes, imagery, and allusions in the works of Beat writers and their consociates, but no book-length work on the extent to which Buddhist philosophical and/or religious practice informs the works themselves. Phrasing the relationship between Ginsberg and Buddhism as "Ginsberg's struggle with Buddhism" allows Trigilio to problemmatize Ginsberg's practice beyond the simplistic portrayal of Ginsberg (or the other Beats for that matter) as an "easy Easterneness" (191). Furthermore, Trigilio's study shows how Ginsberg's interest in Buddhism gave him a philosophical and religious basis from which to offer a revision of Western ontology and religious exceptionalism; in short, Buddhist perspectivalism as a corrective to universalism.

While it is widely acknowledged that Blake, Whitman, Miller, Williams, Olson, and others are crucial precursors to the Beats, Trigilio's examination of Ginsberg's lesser acknowledged influences, particularly his father Louis and his two Buddhist teachers Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Gehlek Rinpoche, are significant additions to a critical understanding of Ginsberg's poetics. Trigilio shows how Ginsberg's tutelage under these two Tantric meditation masters informed his later works and allowed not only spiritual maturation, but also poetic maturation propelling the poet beyond a superficial performativity and into an exploratory and linguistic experimentalism that Trigilio calls "mantra poetics." Furthermore, examining the seriousness with which Ginsberg slowly turned from an exploratory use of Buddhism to become a devoted practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism allows Trigilio to problemmatize Ginsberg's Blakean vision. Analyzing Ginsberg's deepening Buddhist poetic practice in what the critic calls "the four phases of Ginsberg's maturation as a Buddhist . . . anxiety, romanticism, performativity, and linguistic experimentation" (xiii), Trigilio indicates not only Ginsberg's complex lifelong commitment to practicing Buddhism in America, but also the development of his "expressivist counter discourse" into an authentic/authoritative American Buddhist poetics as he moved from Olsonian Projectivism to Mantra poetics (87).

For Trigilio, Ginsberg's exploration of Buddhism deepened his Beat expressionism and improvisation beyond a "reificatory romantic transcendental subjectivity," from "self-

cherishing" to a mature intersubjectivity" (87). In the Vajrayana form of Mahayana Buddhism, intersubjectivity is developed in terms of the Bodhisattva ideal, an exchange of self and other, a skillful responsiveness that emancipates all sentient beings. Trigilio's close reading of poems such as "Angkor Wat," "The Change," and "Wichita Vortex Sutra" shows how Ginsberg's explorations of Buddhist phenomenology and psychology, however autodidactic his practice was at first, informed his composition. Key to this movement for Ginsberg, according to Trigilio, is Nagarjuna's Doctrine of the Two Truths: "The Two Truths recognize the inevitability of the human tendency to reify . . ." (73). The Two Truths challenge our Western bifurcated notion of subjects and objects with a relational model of interdependence and emptiness: things are not separate, distinct, and hypostatic, but are mutually arising and impermanent. The Doctrine of the Two Truths forms the basis of an embodied poetics that unites "perceiving body and perceiving mind and creates sacred speech." Thus, Ginsberg's "embodied poetics of possibility" develops from projectivism to mantra poetics further grounding and expanding his Beat expressionist counter discourse.

As Trigilio notes, Ginsberg's exploratory, or what I would call "comparative," poetics challenges Western formalism to the degree that "our terms for describing debates over poetic language and subjectivity need to be recast to account for variations such as Ginsberg's" (185). Trigilio advocates using "Annie Finch's suggestion of 'multiformalism'—a term that encompasses traditional, avant-garde, and non-Western poetic forms." This is an important methodological adjustment because Beat aesthetics does not attempt to reduce poetic composition to a cultural meme available for reification and commodification. Nor were the Beats interested in formalizing their aesthetics into a school. The Beats in general and Ginsberg in particular were open in both form and content and explored various Western and non-western poetics, weaving these strands into their respective aesthetic expressions. Critical multi-formalism allows a multi-perspectival approach to understanding Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics. Thus, Trigilio makes use of psychoanalysis, queer theory, Buddhist ontology, western style academic critical analysis, biographical criticism, and new historicism. As he astutely observes, "The reality of such poetry depends upon a complexity of psychic, familial, aesthetic, and sacred forms" (29). The effect of Trigilio's multi-formalist excavation of Ginsberg's poetics underscores the complexity of Beat aesthetics generally, while demonstrating the seriousness with which Ginsberg understood his craft as a poet and Buddhist practitioner.

One aspect of Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics that is missing from Trigilio's study and which may be understood as an opportunity for further exploration is the emphasis the poet placed on nakedness, "the figural nakedness from which Ginsberg crafted his Beat aesthetic and within which he constructed his literary reputation" as Trigilio notes in chapter six (159). The importance of nakedness as tenderness and sincerity is an important antidote to the exceptionalist rhetoric of cold war evangelicalism and fundamentalism as well as current manifestations of religious and free market fundamentalism. It is this conception of nakedness that shares significant convergence with what Buddhist scholar Peter Hershock refers to as "vulnerability," the condition for

the possibility of *prajnaparamita*, a state of awakened perfection. It seems that Ginsberg's development of a Beat aesthetic of nakedness already prepared him for the Buddhist vulnerability that allows the emancipatory/liberatory freedom envisioned by Ginsberg.

If there is a weakness in Trigilio's otherwise masterful study of Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics, it is that he relies extensively on western perspectives in reading Ginsberg's poetry. With the exception of Nagarjuna's Doctrine of the Two Truths, Trigilio misses the opportunity to read Ginsberg's work as extensively through other foundational Buddhist philosophical doctrines such as impermanence, emptiness, and the reversibility of form and emptiness. Furthermore, Trigilio's study of Ginsberg's later poetry and his development of mantra poetics can be deepened by focusing on the Tantric dimensions of using the body as a vehicle for enlightenment. Another non-western aesthetic theory Trigilio can make use of in order to advance our understanding of Ginsberg's poetry is *rasa* theory. *Rasa* is both an empathetic and improvisational practice, an embodied practice that can offer a deeper reading of Ginsberg's Beat aesthetics.

The importance of this study cannot be overstated. Not only does it respond skillfully to critics of the last fifty years that have disavowed the significant contribution to American letters by the Beats, but it also shows how “serious” many of these writers/artists were/are. *The Buddhist Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* in particular demonstrates that breadth and depth of evolving maturity that constitutes any writer's career. Furthermore, Trigilio's study opens vast new terrains for Ginsberg scholars and students as well as others who seek to understand the deeper context and development of his middle and later work.