



Chapter 4

Coteries and the Sublime in Allen Ginsberg

I

In 1949, Wallace Stevens wrote 'We do not know what is real and what is not' (472), and it was precisely such an intuition which was the impetus for Allen Ginsberg's career as a poet at about the same time. Ginsberg looked across the expanse of America in mid-century and perceived it to be an enormous hallucination. It was as though a kind of contagion of the spirit had consumed the United States, generating all its public spectacles and invading private consciousness. He might have uttered Stevens's very words. But whereas the older poet, if he had lived beyond 1955, would probably have been content to view this spectacle as the latest episode in the cultural evolution of his society and written his poems about the grand principles at work in such changes, Ginsberg dived into the breach in the 1950s and tried to use his poetry to expedite such evolution, indeed to make it revolution.

Stevens wrote this statement in a poem entitled 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', which among other things explores the relationship between mundane and extraordinary visionary experiences, or what he called, 'The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands' (486). Our spirit, he thought:

resides

In a permanence composed of impermanence,
In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept,
So that the approaching sun and its arrival,
Its evening feast and the following festival,

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,
This tendance and venerable holding-in
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.

(472)

Stevens makes it clear elsewhere in the poem that those hallucinations have to do with the ways communities imagine themselves, their ideologies ('the general fidget from busts of Constantine / To photographs of the late president, Mr Blank' [488]); and there is an intricate, dependent relationship between these hallucinations and the cycles of the natural world. Stevens takes delight in the hallucinations free of the manacles of Christianity, but suggests no direction for them. Denis Donoghue wonders: 'Is that all Stevens's creed comes to, a self-deluding Humanism? [...] a secular translation of Christianity, the shell of belief with the belief left out' (204–5). Eliot tried to recuperate the fading ideals of Christianity, tried to imagine what a Christian society would look like in his century, but Stevens is a poet of the threshold, who looks back to the beginnings of Christianity in the fourth century AD (the time of the Emperor Constantine's conversion when the Roman Empire became Christian, which arguably is more significant than the crucifixion of Christ), and looks forward to the unknown dispensation to come. The self-delusion was all Eliot's, as he could not face a universe that was no longer bound by Christian eschatology.

In the first chapter I suggested the disruptive force of 'hallucinations' within the American context. Anne Hutchinson's Antinomian revelations bred disturbance in seventeenth-century Boston, much to the distress of John Winthrop, who banished her. Following many other critics, I went on to say that the Antinomian strain was the main influence on the literature of the American Renaissance and much that came after. When some of the main tenets of this literature (individualism, self-reliance, etc.) become enshrined as key values in what we can loosely call American ideology in the late nineteenth century, and are used to bolster corporate capitalism, then we encounter the paradox of an Antinomian polis. This is capitalist fantasy: a more or less stable social order that provides a maximum of individual freedom. Of course, this is not a description of the social reality of the time, but such fantasies that use literature and create it are an important element of that reality. Annette Kolodny makes this point eloquently:

The danger in examining the projections of fantasy is the temptation to construe them as unmediated models of behavior. In fact, what we are examining here are not blueprints for conduct, but contexts of imaginative possibility. Fantasy, in other words, does not necessarily coincide with how we act or wish to act in the world. It does, however, represent symbolic forms (often repressed or unconscious) that clarify, codify, organize, explain, or even lead us to anticipate the raw data of experience. In that sense, fantasy may be mediating or integrative, forging imaginative (and imaginable) links between our deepest psychic needs and the world in which we find ourselves. (10)

In Allen Ginsberg's assessment of the United States of his day, there was little difference between such fantasy and historical reality. In interview, he remarked:

'we realized that we were in the midst of a vast American hallucination, that a hallucinatory public consciousness was being constructed in the air waves and television and newspapers, even in literature' (*Spontaneous* 282). As a disciple of Whitman, he had to witness the irony of this state apparatus co-opting the author of 'Song of Myself', among others, for the Cold War ideology that was disseminated throughout the world in such forums as the Salzburg Seminar in Europe (which was where Roy Harvey Pearce conceived of the project of *The Continuity of American Poetry* [1961]). We thus encounter the bizarre spectacle of protest not against something like Winthrop's orthodoxy, but against Antinomianism. Here is Ginsberg again in interview:

Well, since Shelley says that the poet's word is the strongest, the unacknowledged legislator's, the next thing is: let the president execute his desire [laughing], and the Congress do what they want to do, but I'm going to do what I want to do, and now, it's – if one single person wakes up out of the mass hallucination and pronounces a contrary order, or declaration, contrary state, instruction to the State, to the Government, if one person wakes up out of the Vast Dream of America and says I here declare the end of the war, well, what'll happen? (*Spontaneous* 152)

What is this but a rebellion against what Heraclitus called 'the law of common reason' by a person who claims 'an understanding of his own'? In fact, Ginsberg conceived this 'contrary order' not as some Cockaigne, but as the reality that was occluded by the statist spectacle of the US. Things such as LSD, frequent sex, and wild behaviour were all merely the means to get further glimpses of this hidden world.

In this chapter, I wish to show that this is not true, and that Ginsberg is anything but wild Antinomian, rather that he attempted to wake America up from its Antinomian dreams. He was aware of the dangers inherent in the sublime (the drift towards solipsism, the repetition of Emersonian rapture), and the most important period of his career – the 1950s and 1960s – is shaped at the deepest of levels with this concern. His negotiation between history and spiritual rapture is crucially different from that of the nineteenth century, as he does not wish to abscond from awkward problems in the *polis* to a transcendental realm. As a result he reconfigures the relations between the literature of the sublime and its ideological function. It is no longer naïve in the sense that Emerson's sublime was. Ginsberg, I shall argue, socialises and 'familiarises' the sublime: friends, family, and even the larger patterns of national fate are no longer abandoned by the rhapsode, but are imbricated within the very texture of his transcendental experience. Thus, there is no grievous return to everyday reality after the vision on the mountain. Rather, he realises that 'everyday reality' is a kind of continuous theatre staged by hegemonic political forces. His sublime cultural work then becomes the apprehension of an alternative *theatrum mundi*. If we do not know

what is real and what is not, then we can be manipulated easily; Ginsberg wanted to bring America back to the reality that it had forgotten. The heretic cries at his inquisitors that it is they who have erred and that utterance threatens to turn the world upside down, or right side up.

II

At the centre of Allen Ginsberg's poetry for many years was a transcendental vision in which Blake directly addressed him in 1948, and which he reports in 'Psalm IV' (238). Below I give part of one biographer's account of the moment:

'My body suddenly felt *light* . . . it was a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe than I'd been existing in'. He looked further, to the clouds; they seemed signals of something vaster and more far-reaching than a workman's hand. He caught an understanding of the billions of years that the sea had been evaporating and forming into clouds, each one unique in shape, and of the vast complexity of nature. 'I was sitting in the middle of an entire universe as poetry filled with light and intelligence and communication and signals. Kind of like the top of my head coming off, letting in the rest of the universe connected to my own brain'. (Miles 100)

The danger, which is obvious here, is that no matter how intense the experience, the reporting of it will be vacuous. But Ginsberg found a way to maintain such spiritual ecstasy at the centre of his poetic vision in convincing ways. While 'Howl' (1956) does not report on mystical vision directly, its account of those who do have this experience employs this tone, which owes much to the Blake experience and also to section 5 of 'Song of Myself', when the speaker gains sudden insight into the mechanics of all Creation. For Ginsberg, this prophetic mode was the only proper mode for the poet to work in and he scorned the mainstream poetry of the 1950s ('Nobody publishes a word that is not the cowardly robot ravings of a depraved mentality' [*Collected* 167]). The first thing that should be remarked about 'Howl' is that talk of the sublime is displaced in favour of descriptions of people who have experienced it. The result is a Whitmanian catalogue of figures who are not only *seen* by the rhapsode (as in section 15 of 'Song of Myself'), but who themselves are *seeing*:

who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan
angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating
Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war [. . .]

(*Collected* 126)

The subsequent vicissitudes – exalted, tragic, funny, contradictory – which these people endure are all as a result of their vision of the sublime (e.g., ‘who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried’ [*Collected* 129]). Instead of deploying his poetic powers to persuade the reader of the truth of his own ecstatic vision, as Whitman and Wordsworth did, he asserts the sublime through convincing portraits of those among his friends and associates who experienced it.

The danger for any literature that would attempt to link heightened states of awareness with political critique (and eventually action), is of Antinomianism and its alarming ethical implications: it is difficult to establish consensus about the ecstasy experienced. As I remarked already, Emerson, when facing this difficulty in ‘The Over-Soul’, did little more than sweep it under the carpet, insisting that if the revelation was real then there must be consensus (*Selected* 251), which begs the question. Here Ginsberg mobilises a coterie of fellow-visionaries to counter this Antinomian hazard. It is as if he says that the vision *must* be ‘real’ if so many people experienced it. There is a putative solidarity between all the people described in the first section of ‘Howl’: they react against what they see as a pernicious *status quo*, and this is embodied in the figure of Moloch in Section II. The last section of the poem, in the anaphoric phrase ‘I’m with you in Rockland’, makes the solidarity of the Beat visionaries much more than putative:

Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland
 where you’re madder than I am
 I’m with you in Rockland
 where you must feel very strange [. . .]
 [.]
 I’m with you in Rockland
 in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway
 across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night
 (*Collected* 132–3)

In his prose of the time, Ginsberg also stresses the idea of a coterie pitched against the existing state of affairs. What follows is from his ‘Independence Day Manifesto’ from 1959:

Recent history is the record of a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind and exterminate all manifestations of that unique part of human sentience, identical in all men, which the individual shares with his Creator. [. . .] At the same time there is a crack in the mass consciousness of America – sudden emergence of insight into a vast national subconscious netherworld filled with nerve gases, universal death bombs, malevolent bureaucracies, secret police systems, drugs that open the door to

God, ships leaving Earth, unknown chemical terrors, evil dreams at hand. [. . .] America is having a nervous breakdown. Poetry is the record of individual insights into the secret soul of the individual and because all individuals are one in the eyes of their creator, into the soul of the world. The world has a soul. America is having a nervous breakdown. San Francisco is one of many places where a few individuals, poets, have had the luck and courage and fate to glimpse something new through the crack in mass consciousness; they have been exposed to some insight into their own nature, the nature of the governments, and the nature of God. (*Deliberate* 3)

When Ginsberg reminisced in 1977 about his later political activities in the mid-1960s, one notices first the group nature of his activities and realisations and second his recognition that cultural work must offer an alternative spectacle to the spectacles laid on by the Establishment – ‘reality’ by any other name:

And we’d had the same realization: our march had to get its theater together, just as the police and the government did. I think that was the beginning of our realization that national politics was theater on a vast scale, with scripts, sound systems. Whose theater would attract the most customers, whose was a theater of ideas that could be gotten across? (*Deliberate* 18)

And once again, reminiscing about San Francisco in 1955, Ginsberg remarked ‘All this time I realized we were involved as a community with historical change of consciousness and some kind of cultural revolution’ (*Journals* xi). On another level, in Ginsberg’s tireless promotion of the writings of his friends such as Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky, one sees the importance of the idea of the coterie. He did not promote their work because they were his friends, rather they became his friends because they belonged to a community, as Ginsberg saw it at the time, that had had the same vision.

His visionary politics have been criticised for its inability to make more detailed distinctions, both on the macro and micro levels. For instance, Paul Breslin remarks that

the trouble with Ginsberg’s dualism – as with Manichean dualism – is that it creates an utter chasm between secular intelligence and mystical knowledge. Having made his huge repudiation of existing social reality, Ginsberg has little interest in more particular accounts of it, or in secular causality. (25)

Breslin goes on to say that ‘When everything is so relentlessly reduced to its most general and cosmic significance, everything begins to resemble everything else, and the poetry becomes predictable, boring, and impoverished’ (37–8). On the personal level, even as sympathetic a biographer as Barry Miles observes that in the late 1940s Ginsberg was so entranced by the hallucinations of the incipient

Beat group that he 'was apparently oblivious of the disintegration of his friends' through the use of drugs and alcohol (78). It is impossible to refute Breslin's brand of exasperated boredom (although there is no reason why criticism shouldn't express it), but what is more serious is the accusation of Ginsberg's failure of *recognition*, both in the political and social spheres. When other poets fail to connect with the everyday world about them (not recognise their children, as the story about W. B. Yeats goes, etc.), it is not quite so serious as it is in Ginsberg's case, because his poetic and utopian polity is based, at the start of his career, on his ability to *see* that there are other people close to him who experience the same vision. It is all very well for him to hear the voice of Blake, but perhaps the person beside him in Rockland is not another rhapsode fired by Artaud, but merely a person who is mentally ill and is not getting enough quality treatment.

The wider implication of making a distinction between visionary and mad-man is to accept the *status quo* not as theatre but reality, and that is exactly what was difficult for Ginsberg. In 'My War with Allen Ginsberg', Norman Podhoretz roundly condemns Ginsberg's blurring of distinctions: 'There was something cruel about drafting such pitiable creatures into the service of an ideological aggression against the kind of normal life to which they would have given everything to return' (34). He also conjectures about Ginsberg's lifelong fascination with Podhoretz himself:

Was he so disturbed because in his heart of hearts he knew that, no matter what he kept saying aloud, my rejection of his extravagant claims to greatness as a poet and my arguments against his antinomian ideas could not be dismissed out of hand as the ravings of an ignorant philistine who was part of a 'right-wing protopolice surveillance movement'? Did those arguments go on sticking so painfully in his craw because he could never come up with answers that truly satisfied him? [. . .] [T]o his antinomian mind, going mad in America was the only way to be sane, to get high on drugs was the only way to be sober, and to 'scatter their semen freely to whomever come who may' was the only way to experience sex. (36, 33)

As I read 'Howl', Podhoretz's conjecture is accurate; however, he underestimates Ginsberg's ability to criticise himself and his poetry. There is a general tendency in Ginsberg's best work of the late 1950s and early 1960s after 'Howl' to concentrate on *seeing* his friends even more clearly, on recognising their individualities, because he has realised just what is at stake in this perception, that is, a vision of reality that opposed that of the *status quo*.

Where the psychological portraits of fellow Beats in 'Howl' are anonymous and brief, those of 'The Names', written two years later, go to greater length, and indeed portraiture is the poem's single aim. Herbert Huncke, Joe Army, Phil Black, Joan Burroughs, LeRoi Jones, and most importantly Neal Cassady, among others, are named and carefully observed, their traits and backgrounds recorded,

along with important episodes of Ginsberg's acquaintance with them. It is a kind of hall of glory, as these people, in Ginsberg's view, are the 'saints given vision' who are now 'shrouded in junk'. For instance:

Brilliant bitter Morphy stalking Los Angeles after his ghost boy
haunting basements in Denver with his Montmartre black beard
Charming ladies' man for gigolo purpose I heard, great cat for
Shakespearean sex
first poet suicide I knew we sat on park benches I watched him despair his
forehead star
my elder asked serious advice, gentle man! international queer pride
humbled to pre-death cigarette gun fright
His love a young blond demon of broken army, his nemesis his own mad
cock for the kids sardonic ass
his dream mouthful of white prick trembling in his head – woke a bullet in
his side days later in Passaic
last moments gasping stricken blood under stars coughing intestines &
lighted highway cars flowing past his eyes into the dark.

(Collected 176–7)

There is no doubt that this is a highly romanticised portrait, but it is complex in that its hagiography takes cognisance of all the 'lowlife' elements and still insists on celebrating this life. The last line of the poem emphasises the importance for Ginsberg of clear perception of his associates:

Save from the grave! O Neal I love you I bring this Lamb into the middle of
the world happily – O tenderness – to *see* you again – O tenderness – to
recognize you in the middle of Time.

(Collected 179; italics mine)

The greatest crisis of this task of seeing and recognition occurs in 'Kaddish'. What we see in the later poem is Ginsberg turning to his own family history and attempting to make the distinction between people who are insane and suffer horribly because of it, and people who are beatific and experience mystical visions. Paul Breslin holds that in the poem 'Ginsberg implicitly asks us to understand the origins of his penchant for emotional melodrama and his difficulty in distinguishing radical unmasking from paranoid fantasy' (31). But by identifying the interest of the poem as the dramatisation of Ginsberg's 'difficulty', Breslin trivialises 'Kaddish', a poem which is an important juncture in Ginsberg's negotiation between the sublime and radical political action. In this Breslin is not alone: other critics read this phase of Ginsberg as inchoate Confessionalism (von Hallberg 36, Vendler, *Soul* 9). Naomi Ginsberg was involved from early adulthood in Communist politics, and outstripped her husband Louis in her radical

criticisms of the American political system. The arguments of Ginsberg's parents obviously did much to awaken his own political awareness. But as he grew up, what Ginsberg witnessed and what 'Kaddish' documents is the process whereby Naomi's radical politics were absorbed by her madness. Overall, her anti-Establishment opinions become Ginsberg's own (as he rejected the ameliorist socialism of his father), but there comes a point when Ginsberg can recognise that her ideas of conspiracy have passed over a threshold, and transformed her from politically radical to clinically insane.

The poem begins by repeating the vision in 'Howl' of the insubstantial *status quo*:

No more to say, and nothing to weep for but the Beings in the Dream,
trapped in its disappearance,
sighing, screaming with it, buying and selling pieces of phantom,
worshipping each other,
worshipping the God included in it all – longing or inevitability? – while
it lasts, a Vision – anything more?
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. (Collected 209)

The register is muted by grief, but the accusation is identical. The implication here is that it is impossible to distinguish between sanity and insanity: everything is phantasmal, even the buildings in the street and the transactions that happen in the shops. The turning point in Ginsberg's awareness takes place in section 2 of the poem:

By that afternoon I stayed home from school to take care of you –
once and for all – when I vowed forever that once man disagreed with
my opinion of the cosmos, I was lost –
By my later burden – vow to illuminate mankind – this is release of
particulars – (mad as you) – (sanity a trick of agreement) –
But you stared out the window on the Broadway Church corner, and
spied a mystical assassin from Newark,
So phoned the Doctor – 'OK go way for a rest' – so I put on my coat
and walked you downstreet [. . .] (Collected 212)

The first line expresses Ginsberg's need for solidarity and his early awareness of the perils of Antinomianism; in the second line there is solidarity between the mother and son: each is as mad as the other, and the madness, at this point, is still radical political critique, since 'sanity [is] a trick of agreement'. This is still the idea that animates 'Howl'. But in the third line quoted above, Ginsberg

makes the crucial distinction: he realises that when Naomi sights a 'mystical assassin', she has departed from their shared reality. Ginsberg's subsequent phone call (and it is of note that he guiltily swallows the 'I' at the beginning of the fourth line – 'So phoned the Doctor') implies his acceptance of the institutional structures which patrol the boundaries between sane and insane people. Over the years, as Naomi's mental illness progresses, Ginsberg has to violently restrain her, becoming himself something of an exponent of the 'right-wing protopolice surveillance movement' ('I pushed her against the door and shouted 'DON'T KICK ELANOR!' – she stared at me – Contempt – die – disbelief her sons are so naive, so dumb – "Elanor is the worst spy! She's taking orders!"' [Collected 221]). The challenge which Naomi poses for his Beat ideas is perhaps more profound than that offered by the figure of Norman Podhoretz: Naomi, fully insane, becomes a living parody of them, as well as of Ginsberg's own expansive egotism:

'I am a great woman – am truly a beautiful soul – and because of that
they (Hitler, Grandma, Hearst, the Capitalists, Franco, Daily News, the
'20s, Mussolini, the living dead) want to shut me up – Buba's the head of
a spider network –'
(Collected 221)

In Breslin's reading, 'Kaddish' is little more than an apology for Ginsberg's own outré political opinions, as if Ginsberg implores us, asking what chance did he have for a sane view of the world when his mother was like this (31)? But the most forceful recent reading of the poem is provided by Tony Triglio. He draws on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of anti-psychiatry, and understands 'Kaddish' as a poem 'that incorporates desire to multiply, rather than fix, meaning' (781). He observes that 'Kaddish' represents Ginsberg's profound engagement with the female principle, and he explores the implications of this for his prophetic poetry. While I am in agreement with him that there is a deep shift in Ginsberg's poetry between 'Howl' and 'Kaddish', my conclusion could not differ more. In my reading, rather than pushing Ginsberg further from what Triglio, after Deleuze and Guattari, calls 'oedipal state control' (782), the poem makes Ginsberg face the extent to which he depends on it. Tellingly, Triglio, in his detailed reading of 'Kaddish', skips over the lines I discussed above where Ginsberg himself calls the doctor to have his mother committed, swallowing his 'I' in the process. It is this passage that shows Ginsberg's acceptance of the distinctions made by traditional, Oedipal, state-controlled psychiatry, and not anti-psychiatry. We want our favoured poets to agree with our favoured philosophers; unfortunately, it is a critical temptation to which Triglio, in this instance, injudiciously succumbs.

The central 'difficulty' that Naomi's madness and death present to Ginsberg is how to maintain his own 'mystical vision' when she seems present a grotesque mirror-image of it from beyond what Ginsberg himself acknowledges as the bounds of sanity. Of course, the poem does not set out in any simple sense to resolve that – it is first and foremost an elegy, and the conventions of elegy

govern its exposition, development and closure. But, having made the distinction between sanity and insanity, as Ginsberg inexorably does during the progress of the poem, and deemed his mother insane, there is a tender irony in the last lines when she implores him in a note to 'Get married Allen, don't take drugs' (*Collected* 224). Ginsberg doesn't comment on this: the reader is left uncertain as to whether this is the height of her insanity, or a momentary remission of sanity. In my reading, I see this as Ginsberg's way of identifying the difficulty which is inherent to Beat culture, the difficulty of recognition and distinction. This difficulty does not invalidate it (as Podhoretz would like to think), but rather invigorates it. While hegemonic political forces sought to elide the gaps, difficulties and contradictions of Cold War America, Ginsberg's 'Kaddish' acknowledges the challenge to an aesthetic like his own that is fundamental in its social critique. No other Beat writer acknowledged and explored this difficulty so profoundly.

The intense portraiture of 'Kaddish' would seem to have confirmed Ginsberg's commitment to the mode in all his subsequent work. Some of his best poems to come would be retrospectives and elegies for his Beat associates. Certainly, Ginsberg emerges from biographical accounts of his life as an unwaveringly loyal friend (for instance, despite the anti-Semitic abuse he received from Jack Kerouac). But beyond such personal loyalty, the poems and portraits to follow serve the purpose of confirming his original intuitions of Beat visions in the poetry of the 1950s. That is, the poems allow him to restate the validity of his socialised sublime, to repeat the fact that these figures, his friends, were touched by truly beatific intuitions, and that this constituted a 'crack in the mass consciousness of America'.

III

In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to discuss how these ideas animate one of his great poems of the 1960s, 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' (written 1966). Ginsberg's poetry in this period moves from portraiture to landscape: we are now shown wide panoramas of the landscapes and cityscapes of America. In another poet, this would indicate a thematic shift, but for Ginsberg it represents a deepening of his exploration of the ligatures between private ecstasy and political vision; such ligatures work to counter the Antinomian tendency so ubiquitous in the American Romantic tradition.

'Wichita Vortex Sutra' has been criticised for its crude treatment of historical causality: for instance, Paul Breslin asks how it is possible that, as Ginsberg propounds, a nineteenth-century temperance campaign led to the war in Vietnam (31–2). But to look to the poem for the kind of argumentative coherence that one gets from history books is a category mistake. The poem is of no value for the way that it explains historical events, rather it is an exploration of the ways in which the US imaginary is produced, through its mass media, and, further, the

poems test this imaginary against the landscape of the continent. After all, the political system claims to be an expression of the tract of land that stretches from sea to shining sea; Ginsberg's poem explores the truth of this claim. There is an extra moral dimension to such exploration as the poem is written during a time of war. Central to 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' is recognition, not of people as above in 'The Names' and 'Kaddish', but of the land. It is worth noting the increased phenomenological exactitude of his descriptions of landscape in this period: nowhere before were they so lengthy and detailed. In part this is due to the influence of Ezra Pound and Basil Bunting, but also it is necessary to his sublime, as this idea developed in his work from 'Howl' onwards. A lot of the poem is made up of serene, meticulous description, like the following:

A black horse bends its head to the stubble
 beside the silver stream winding thru the woods
 by an antique red barn on the outskirts of Beatrice –
 Quietness, quietness
 over this countryside [...] (*Collected* 399)
 [...]
 Though the highway's straight,
 dipping downward through low hills,
 rising narrow on the far horizon
 black cows browse in caked fields
 ponds in the hollows lie frozen [...] (*Collected* 403)

Traditional syntax and connectives are partially abandoned in an effort to mimic the speed with which he views the scene from the bus or car. Each line is like an atom of perception which hits, is registered and glances off to no great symbolic effect. Rather, the aggregate effect of these impacts is to impress the reader with the speaker's faithfulness to appearances. The tone is low key and factual, and if one were not familiar with Ginsberg's previous work one would be surprised by the ecstatic declaration of the end of the war in Vietnam which he makes at the poem's conclusion. Ginsberg's point, if it makes sense to talk of a 'point' in such a context, is that in order to create 'language' that will challenge the language of political propaganda, his own words must be 'full' of the United States in a way that is phenomenologically true, that is, must be full of its land. His descriptions of the landscape are at once proof adduced and a kind of imaginative charge that will strengthen his challenge to the official war machine. In an interview he related the following anecdote:

I remember Burroughs saying during one presidential campaign, I think when Truman was running for president, that if an elephant had walked up in front of all those candidates in the middle of a speech and shat on the ground and walked away, the candidate would have ignored it. (*Spontaneous* 281)

birth of the tourist industry, and more generally, in the American context, as we saw in the first chapter, with the emergence of corporate capitalism in the late nineteenth century); fourth, Romantic poetry is duplicitous seduction, or rather, these poets whore themselves. What results in Palmer's work is *non sequitur* and/or disjunctions of voice, so that the narrative of no one lyric subject can be gleaned from any poem. The devices used by other Language poets are various.

Whatever the merits of this group of writers in critiquing hegemony (and they are disputed), it has been the signal failing of much academic criticism of poetry over the last few decades that it has not attended to American poets who, unlike the Language writers, have extended the tradition of the Romantic sublime. (Indubitably, the leftist politics of Language writers is attractive to most academics, but the failure cannot be reduced to ideological difference alone. One factor might be the decreased cultural prestige of poetry in general from the time of the 1940s, with a resultant decrease in critics' ability to attend to those rhetorical resources of poetry which distinguish it from discursive prose.) And when I say 'sublime', I mean the non-naïve version which we saw in Ginsberg's poetry, one that is aware of Foucauldian narratives of political complicity, as well as of the constructed nature of the social and familial self. Time and time again, poststructuralist criticism was satisfied to alert readers to the constructedness of a particular social or cultural phenomena, and failed to realise that this does not reduce the ontological ballast of those phenomena. In other words, one can admit that the bourgeois self is jerry-built and 300 years old, but still admit its reality as a basis for moving lyric poetry.

This is the achievement of Ginsberg. That his poetry was one of the important factors that made Aquarians out of Americans; and that his views were distorted and debased by disciples, does not mean that he is not one of the most important poets of the American twentieth century. Ideologically fly, joyous in the celebration of the self, and that self's friends and family, his poetry acknowledges the ways in which America has erred but wants to bring it back from its heresy. 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' provides one of the most accurate descriptions of the nexes between the phenomenological space of the individual and the imaginary of democratic ideology. Similarly, there has never been a prophetic sublime that relies so much on accurate descriptions of people (in the work of the late 1950s) and landscape (in the work of the 1960s). I have argued that Ginsberg developed such a dependence in his poetry in order to counter the objections of Antinomianism, voiced so well by Podhoretz. Yes, this poetry is reductive in its treatment of historical causality, as Breslin and von Hallberg hold, but to leave the argument there is to remain blind to Ginsberg's new sublime, which turns from the naïveté of Emerson's, and comprehends how the filaments of personality, geography and political guilt are interwoven in an ecstatic survey of his historical moment.

Chapter 5

Thom Gunn's American Dispersals

I

Drug-induced experiences are integral to the poetry of Thom Gunn. Several of his poems from the 1960s and 1970s end with a curt note such as 'LSD, Folsom Street', leaving the reader in no doubt that the events the poems narrate are not just the result of a rich imagination. The openness of Gunn's admission owes much to Allen Ginsberg, and one wonders if it is in compensation for his reticence at the time about his own homosexuality (he was not 'out' in his poetry until later in the 1970s). Gunn lived and worked in California for exactly a half century to his death in 2004, and the poems with their notes also indicate Gunn's participation in the kind of lifestyle for which that state is renowned. In an interview, Gunn once joked that 'The English think of California as being a good deal more exotic than it really is', and continued by remarking that they 'don't seem to think that people lead regular, normal lives in California' (*Shelf* 223). (It is only fair to remark that if Gunn's poetry from the 1960s and 1970s was all they had to go on then, then the English would be justified in such impressions.) Concentrating on Gunn's drug poems allows us to trace not just the use of this device, but also, as I hope to show, to trace his profound, critical engagement with the American Romantic tradition.

II

One of the most influential books of the hippie era was Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968). Perhaps the sobriquet is uncharitable, as Don Juan's use of mescaline, psilocybin and yerba was connected with a rigorous intellectual and spiritual discipline which took years to master (which Castaneda, his apprentice, ultimately failed to do). The lack of charity stems rather from the way that such books were digested by the wider American culture, hungry at the time for ecstatic states of consciousness and reckless of their consequences in the everyday world. By the 1970s even a