

East Hill Farm: Seasons with Allen Ginsberg
By Gordon Ball
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Reviewed by Marc Olmsted

Any Allen Ginsberg scholar is aware of Gordon Ball's already considerable contributions, specifically his *Allen Verbatim*, literally the first collection of interviews, and his intelligent editing of two volumes of Ginsberg's journals. In this account, Ball explains how Ginsberg, founder and treasurer of the Committee on Poetry, Inc., funded an intentional "haven for comrades in distress" in the late 1960s. Thus, the East Hill Farm came to be.

Ginsberg's resultant upstate New York Cherry Valley farm has come up in three biographies and is documented in his collection of poetry, *Fall of America*. Still, this 1967-1970 period usually gets passed over quickly because of the sheer density of Ginsberg's life-material. What an pleasure to see this section of Ginsberg's life "slowed down" into a 400-plus page book, all the more so because Gordon Ball actually lived there. To quote Ginsberg's own words from the back cover of *East Hill Farm*, "Ball has been marvelously placed as a participant and observer of many extraordinary art situations." Indeed! Ginsberg's film maker friend Barbara Rubin was the catalyst to locating the property, and the mutual friend that brought a then rather aimless Gordon Ball on board to help with the prodigious efforts of realistically settling there. The details of getting this 100 year old building into livable shape constitute at times a harrowing adventure. More than once, it seems a Sisyphean task.

Ball brings a real insider aspect further freed by the physical departure of most of the main players, which most importantly include Peter Orlovsky, Ray Bremser, Herbert Hunke and Gregory Corso. The general reader at the very least will be moved to investigate the writings of this hip rogue's gallery.

Allen's relationship with Orlovsky is a great document here unto itself, though it is clear that like an old married couple, they are now together for other reasons than sex. What those reasons are will probably take an entire volume by a future scholar. The continual chaos of Peter shooting speed on the premises paints a very different picture from the idyllic portrait Richard Avedon took of Ginsberg and Orlovsky hugging on the cover of *Evergreen Review* (August 1970), published in the middle of this tumultuous period. The book gives Orlovsky's neutral expression in that photo a whole new patina. This revelation is not dissimilar to the wake-up call of finding out William Burroughs didn't completely give up junk after his apomorphine cure. We may never know what Orlovsky's psychological problems were beyond his drug addiction, though his brother Julius, barely a sketch in both Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, might today be diagnosed somewhere on the autism scale. Julius, never uttering a word in Kerouac's fiction, can at times be hilariously canny and surprisingly aware when he does speak – and Ball hears

him speak a lot! Orlovsky off speed is certainly lovable, as the title of his one volume of City Lights poetry, *Clean Asshole Poems & Smiling Vegetable Songs*, so wackily personifies. Lest one think that Orlovsky had no real chops, Ball quotes William Carlos Williams's description of Orlovsky as "the best lyric poet of his generation." Ball offers the following lines from Orlovsky as an example (the poem's title is not given):

I was born to remember a song about love – on a hill a butterfly
makes a cup that I drink from, walking over a bridge of
flowers. (48)

Ball is also recording a time that would prove pivotal in Ginsberg's philosophical development. Though Ball correctly says that Ginsberg began his Buddhist studies prior "Howl" (77), they were then purely intellectual and part of a sort of omnivorous gnosticism that would eventually include Hinduism and to a lesser degree, the Sufi path. Kerouac took it much more seriously, as they famously debate in *The Dharma Bums*, with Ginsberg's Alvah Goldbrook being less than converted (Kerouac 28-29). Ginsberg would always prove interested, probably drawn by the humanist and complex philosophical elements, and calls himself a "Buddhist Jew" in Ball's book here (22), but the altar he builds in the attic incorporates just about every religion under the sun (75). In 1968, Ball recounts Ginsberg on William F. Buckley's TV interview program, *Firing Line*, repeating a Tibetan Buddhist exorcism mantra and then chanting the Hindu Hare Krishna mantra with his harmonium only a few minutes later. This mixture of non-theism and theism, of no fixed reference point (Buddha's *anatta*) and a soul, will be seriously challenged in a few short years under Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa's tutelage. The comforts and implications of a creator god and an eternal self will not survive in Ginsberg's metaphysics.

In 1969, Ginsberg began formal meditation practice an hour a day after tutelage with Hindu master Swami Muktananda, in response to the increasingly violent language of leftist politics (371). Though not mentioned here, Ginsberg would meet Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche by kismet, sharing a NYC cab in 1971, and the habit of sitting meditation would serve him well, though he would eventually switch from closed-eye silent mantra style to open-eyed attention to breath, which he found more grounding (Ginsberg 381). Ball does quote Ginsberg later in 1988, however: "My guru, Tibetan Lama Chogyam Trungpa, suggested I try a different one... 'Ah!' Which is appreciation of the spaciousness around us. Chanting Om so aggressively didn't intrigue people to enter that space, but probably just mystified them" (442).

Ball refers to Ginsberg's 1963 poem "The Change" as a rejection of Blakean visionary grasping for "Zen Buddhist ordinary mind set in everyday reality" (77). One can see "The Change" as some level of acceptance of being in a body, rather than "tripping out." Still, Ginsberg's proclamation of mutual tenderness and its fulfillment was his substitution for visions in 1963, not this "ordinary mind" solution of uncontrived "calm abiding" Trungpa later suggested to him. At one point, Ginsberg told Ball that he considered his most memorable line to be from "The Change": "so that I do / live I will

die” (39). Spoken in 1968, one wonders if he’d say the same towards the end of the near-30 years that remained in his life.

What really propels him deeper into Buddhism’s acceptance of suffering is the car accident that will break his hip in 1969. As Ball mentions, Ginsberg gave an *East Village Other* interview where he rhetorically asked what happens if “you get carcrashes instead of cocksucks?” (442). At the time of his accident, Ginsberg wrote to Ferlinghetti, “I gotta get a new metaphysics. Body’s too unreliable” (157). Likewise, he wrote to Charles Olson that “nausea hip to rib for a day and night realizing the body’s a collapsable pain trap -& couldn’t get past that. How’d I get into this body-stump?...” (118).

Ball offers by example, again and again, that to really know Ginsberg was to love him. With the Ginsbergian taste of mortal sweetness and heartbreak, Ball finishes his memoir with Ginsberg’s last word to Gregory Corso, which Corso repeated at his funeral:

Toodle-loo. (450)

Works Cited

Ginsberg, Allen. *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Kerouac, Jack. *Dharma Bums*. New York: Signet Books, 1959.