Correspondence of Allen Ginsberg, CC’48, Offers Insight into his Poetic Evolution

BY JASON HOLLANDER

In the winter of 1966, Allen Ginsberg, CC’48, wrote an article in the “Village Voice” about the poet Allen Ginsberg, CC’48. Ginsberg noted in the story that he was feeling overwrought by his many commitments and needed help maintaining order in his life. Tobias tracked down Ginsberg’s phone number through a friend and called the fellow Columbia College graduate to volunteer his services. Ginsberg, who happened to live just four blocks from Tobias in the East Village, was immediately receptive.

“He told me to come on over, and to pick up a quart of milk on the way,” says Tobias of the conversation which led to a two year stint for him as Ginsberg’s assistant.

More than 35 years later, Tobias is responsible for spearheading the Rare Book and Manuscript Library’s current exhibit: “The Lion for Real,” which includes correspondence between Ginsberg and legendary Columbia English professors Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren. The display, for which Tobias is co-curator and contributed pieces from his own collection, runs through August 2 on the sixth floor east of Butler Library.

Tobias says that Ginsberg’s own words, with his own words, With Ginsberg’s own words, one can hear his growing pains and also features a typescript of the poem “Howl!” that Ginsberg wrote his former classmate Lucien Carr and a mimeographed first edition of “Howl!” that he sent to Van Doren.

Tobias was introduced to Ginsberg’s poetry while attending high school in Brooklyn in the early 1960s. His friend smuggled a pocket anthology of poems into class one day and the language—which addressed sexuality and eroticism with a unique androgynous impact—horrified him. Of course he couldn’t discuss the poems in English class, Tobias notes, because one could get in trouble for possessing, let alone talking about such “subversive” material. But American culture evolved, and Tobias would eventually go on to write his master’s thesis at S.U.N.Y. Stony Brook on Ginsberg’s early works.

“(Ginsberg) never lost this enormous sense of self,” says Tobias. “Many people have a complaint about the world and her beloved interest is another, but he was able to communicate his feelings. His clear statements were always in his poetry.”

Allen Ginsberg

On the strength of his dedication, Ginsberg was immediately receptive.

“You'd be disappointed, but write as many as you please. I have [an] understanding of if there is a sacrifice of either, then I think I understand, and it greatly moved me. You'll get there yet.”

In the last line, “You'll get there yet.”

A 1949 letter from Columbia English Professor Mark Van Doren to his former student, Allen Ginsberg. Responding to some verse that Ginsberg sent him, Van Doren writes in the last line, “You’ll get there yet.”

The exhibit runs through August 2 on the sixth floor of Butler Library.

**Opening of “Kaddish” by Allen Ginsberg**

>“Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement without a sacrifice of either, then I think I understand, and it greatly moved me. You’ll get there yet.”

>—Opening of “Kaddish” by Allen Ginsberg, written for his deceased mother in 1959

>“I dedicated it to him as a sort of ironic gesture since he’s the Analyst or Professor who sees "no value" in the experiences of the Lion which is supposed to be God, not Lionel Trilling as [Diana] apparently misconstrued it. Rather, he must say.”

>—Mark Van Doren to Allen Ginsberg

>“I'd be disappointed, wouldn't I? I'm not interested in understanding your letters. But write as many as you please. The line I have [an] understanding of is a radical departure, metrically, but that's OK. The burden of [poems] one and two I think is understood and it greatly moves me. You'll get there yet.”

>—Allen Ginsberg to Van Doren