

## Energy of Vortex in Ginsberg's *The Fall of America*

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In 1956 Allen Ginsberg published “Howl,” which gave a great shock to American society in those days. After the publication of this poem, he published *The Fall of America* in 1972, to which National Book Award for Poetry was given in 1973. As evident from the subtitle “poems of these states 1965-1971,” this long poem is the so-called record of Ginsberg’s travel across the United States in the period from 1965 to 1971. The poem is chronologically divided into five sections, in which Ginsberg depicts his journey from a viewpoint of the first person narrator “I.”

In the review of *The Fall of America* Helen Vendler remarks that “I still tend to prefer the shorter poems, because they allow some drawing of breath for relief from Ginsberg’s ardent atlas.”<sup>1</sup> A new energetic element which is not observed both in “Howl” and “Kaddish” (1961) is infused into *The Fall of America*. The word “Vortex” in the title of the first section “Thru the Vortex West Coast to East 1965-1966” refers to the new energetic element. “Vortex” is a key word to make clear this new energetic element in *The Fall of America*.

In relation with the idea of “Vortex” we direct our notice to “Vorticism”<sup>2</sup> in a history of English literature. Generally speaking, some changes in the revolutionary arts occur in the early twenty century. In Italy Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) promotes “Futurism”<sup>3</sup> and later Ezra Pound (1885-1972)<sup>4</sup> speaks in defense of “Imagism” in the poetry

movement.<sup>5</sup> “Vorticism” was proposed by Pound and Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), who is an artist as well as a critic, in the magazine entitled *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* published in 1914. Pound gives a definition of “Vorticism” in this magazine, as follows:

[Y]ou may think of him [the man] as DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance, as CONCEIVING instead of merely observing and reflecting. (*B1* 153)

In short, “Vorticism” takes the conception that art should reflect not only the surface of objects by watching the top of circumstance, but try to grasp the essence of them by flowing into the inner part of circumstance. In addition, they claim “a circulation with a still center: a system of energies drowning in whatever comes near, *B1* vi.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Reed Way Dasenbrock says in use of Lewis’s words in the following:

The meaning of the Vortex and Vorticism as propounded by Lewis was simplicity itself. “You think at once of a whirlpool,” he explained, “at the heart of the whirlpool is a great silent place where all the energy is concentrated, and there at the point of concentration is the Vorticist.” (Dasenbrook 17)

As clear from the citation above, “Vortex” possesses energy, in the center of which “Vorticist” exists. Pound calls this center “point of maximum energy.”<sup>7</sup>

The goal of the present paper is to make an investigation into “Vortex” in *The Fall of America* from a viewpoint of “Vorticism” as well as to deal with such aspects of Modernism as fragments, inartistic materials, new

energy described in Ginsberg's works.

In "AFTER WORDS" Ginsberg says that *The Fall of America* is a "history epic." As both the title of the first section and another title "Wichita Vortex Sutra" imply, the narrator "I" indicates that America is similar to the structure of "Vortex." The fact that "Wichita" is called "the heart of the vortex, 404" has an evidence to support what the writer says. Geographically speaking, the center of "Vortex" corresponds with Wichita in Kansas. The city "Wichita" is located in the center of the United States. The narrator keeps traveling over this "Vortex" without any purpose as well as without any consistency both in time and place.

Of the subject of *The Fall of America*, Vendler remarks that "He [Ginsberg] has two subjects: the state of America and the state of his life." To put it otherwise, *The Fall of America* is a reflection of both a history epic of America and Ginsberg himself. Vendler adds that "[A] long poem of these states ... will finally sum up the physical and spiritual map of America."<sup>8</sup> From Vendler's words of comment, therefore, it may be concluded that the structure of "Vortex" in Ginsberg's poem refers to his life through the above-mentioned energy and finally steals into the inside of America.

*The Fall of America* develops on the basis of the landscape of America, through which we catch a glimpse of "Vortex" in the narrator's consciousness. The following lines show us another structure of "Vortex" through this consciousness.

So home, traveler, past the newspaper language factory  
under Union Station railroad bridge on Douglas  
to the center of the Vortex, calmly returned  
to Hotel Eaton —

Carry Nation began the war on Vietnam here  
 with an angry smashing ax  
 attacking Wine — (410)

Here, “under Union Station railroad bridge on Douglas/to the center of the Vortex” suggests that the narrator considers Wichita to be the center of “Vortex.” In short, the whole of America is regarded as “Vortex” itself. Moreover, the phrase “So home, traveler” implies that the energy of “Vortex” stimulates the so-called homing instinct of man.

As obvious from the lines “Carry Nation began the war on Vietnam here/with an angry smashing ax/attacking Wine,” on the other hand, the scene goes to “the war on Vietnam.” This shows that the description of the streets observed in the narrator’s journey shifts to his consciousness in Ginsberg’s poem. In the narrator’s consciousness one scene which the narrator actually sees intertwines with various scenes from the truck. The description of the narrator’s consciousness, which is regarded as the journey of his inner self, put a great emphasis on the Vietnam War. In other words, the word “angry” in the phrase “an angry smashing ax” bears testimony to his objection against the Vietnam War.

About whether the Vietnam War was right or wrong, various opinions have arisen at present. Paul Johnson claims that the dispatch of US army to Vietnam in 1961 has been a great mistake that America made.<sup>9</sup> Walter T. Davis also remarks about the forfeit of Americans’ self-confidence caused by the Vietnam War, as follows.

As a nation we [Americans] have lost our way. We do not know where we are going because we no longer know who we are ... [T]he crisis erupted a quarter of a century ago when our projected self-image,

a longer-than-life representation of generations of American heroes, died in Vietnam. (Davis ii)

As clear from the above-mentioned phrase “a longer-than-life representation of generations of American heroes,” it may be said that the Vietnam War has been the worst event that controlled the fate of America. As Johnson points out, however, in the early period when the Vietnam War broke out, moderate liberalists as well as the editors in both *Washington Post* and *New York Times* supported the Vietnam War.

Therefore, the idea against the Vietnam War was not popular in public, but from the year 1966 on the antiwar movement grew stronger.<sup>10</sup> The lines “Meanwhile Working Girls sort mail into the red slot/Rivers of newsprint to soldiers’ Vietnam/*Infantry Journal*, *Kanackee/Social Register*, *Wichita Star*, 375” show that various kinds of mass media treated the Vietnam War in those days.

In the 1960s such mass media as TV, radios, newspapers, magazines are considered to be typical. The narrator in Ginsberg’s poem made good use of articles or news stories written in these mass media in the poem. The quotation below denotes that the poet reflected the news story as it stood.

“... several battalions of U.S. troops in a search and destroy operation in the Coastal plain near Bong Son, 300 mi. Northeast of Saigon. Thus far the fighting has been a series of small clashes. In a related action 25 miles to the South, Korean troops killed 35 Viet Cong near Coastal highway Number One.” (382)

In such cases as this, Ginsberg picks up fragmentary matters from the

radio broadcast as well as from the newspapers and magazines which the narrator read in the middle of traveling over the United States. The following example illustrates how effectively the news story in the radio broadcast works in his poem.

Aiken Republican on the Radio                      60,000  
    Northvietnamese troops now infiltrated but over 250,000  
    South Vietnamese armed men  
    our Enemy —  
    Not Hanoi  
    Not China our enemy  
    The Viet Cong! (398)

The figures 60,000 and 250,000 in the quotation shows how attentively the narrator listens to the news concerning the Vietnam War and how he made use of the news. In other words, the narrator directs a great notice to the news broadcast through the radio.

The narrator's journey of consciousness starts with insertion of the news about the Vietnam War as well as the international situation into the poem. "The Viet Cong" in the last line seems to refer not only to the soldiers but also to the citizens. In this sense, the narrator attacks America for its intervene militarily in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> It is also pointed out that the narrator distrusts the mass media which creates the war in saying that "Green corn here healthy under sky/& telephone wires carry news as before,/radio bulletins & television images/build War — , 445."

In addition, the narrator's negative attitude against the Vietnam War becomes more prominent in the lines "Anti Vietnam War Demonstrator soldiers sentenced/For Contempt of President:/Hard Labor — , 386." In

short, the narrator strongly criticizes America as well as the Vietnam War.

Another example is given for illustration.

Crescent moon setting on low hills West —

Military forces over radio

push bombing N. Vietnam

*Lifelines*, sponsored by Henry L. Hunt, Beans. (385)

Our notice should be directed to the fact that the news broadcast over the radio is mentioned immediately after a new or crescent moon is described. Here, the crescent moon is intersected with the radio broadcast news in the mind of the narrator. In this description, “Vortex” is observed without any direct criticism marked by the narrator. To put it otherwise, the narrator keeps his presence of mind in the criticism against the War.

In this connection, the narrator takes a confrontational attitude against the then American society. This negative consciousness given by the narrator is illustrated in the following citation.

American Eagle beating its wings over Asia

million dollar helicopters

a billion dollars worth of Marines

who loved *Aunt Betty*

Drawn from the shores and farms shaking (399)

The literal interpretation of the above-mentioned quotation is that many helicopters of the American army attack Asian countries. Needless to say, “American Eagle” stands for the American flag. The phrase “a billion dollars worth of Marines” indicates the fact that the narrator has a cool

look at the whole United States through the Vietnam War where the American helicopters bombed the Asian country. At the same time, the narrator's calm observation proves to strengthen his criticism against the Vietnam War caused by the United States.

What is more important is implied in the lines below. Beside the Vietnam War the narrator seems to have a great objection against American capitalism.

Radio programs about the Federal Octopus —

Seraphs of Money Power on Texas plains

huge fat-bellied power-men

shoving piles of Capital

by train

across grasslands — (389)

At the same time when the narrator sees “Texas plains,” he ironically recognizes “Money Power” to be “Seraphs.” The reason he has an ironical look at “Money Power” is because “Seraphs” belongs to the highest order of the ninefold celestial hierarchy in the traditional Christian angelology. The narrator's visual and auditory senses simultaneously works in such phrases as “Seraphs of Money Power” and “piles of Capital.” The verse form is composed on the model of “Vortex.” In addition, “piles of Capital” is promoted “by train.” Connected with this expression, our focus is directed to the phrase “the Iron Horse hurrying to war” in the lines below.

Too late, too late

the Iron Horse hurrying to war,

too late for laments



too late for warning — (445)

Here, the narrator regards “Iron Horse” as a symbol of the United States. The above-mentioned lines show that the narrator has some doubts about the capital and material affluence America has created. The narrator’s view “enemy” is more concretely specified in the lines “ — my enemy machine chatterjabber mind/making Borax Borax Borax Borax/spinal column thought, 436.” That is to say, the narrator emphasizes that America has been “making Borax.” In other words, the materials and information America has made are equivalent for “Borax.” Therefore, the Vietnam War is recognized as “Borax” in the poem in which all the things created in America are described as “Borax.”

As pointed out above, our understanding of some natural landscapes in America, some information presented by the mass media, and the narrator’s consciousness from a viewpoint of the structure of “Vortex” makes Ginsberg’s antiwar ideas against the Vietnam War more prominent.

On the other hand, many beautiful natural landscapes are described in *The Fall of America*. This description has no relation to the Vietnam War. “Howl” depicts the so-called depressed and “beaten” people named “hipsters,” who are a dark shadow hidden in the “affluent” society in America. In addition, an insane woman called Naomi in “Kaddish” represents some covered as well as negative aspects taken root in America. In this way, Ginsberg sheds some light on these social problems with aid of such expressions as poems. In this connection, Justin Quinn claims that the first part of *The Fall of America* “Wichita Vortex Sutra” expresses the United States, as in the following.

Central to “Wichita Vortex Sutra” is recognition, not of people (as

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. (Quinn)

To put it otherwise, Ginsberg points out that this poem describes not only part of American society but also the whole of America, which is his main purpose of the present poem.

The second part entitled “Autumn Gold: New England Fall” also shows us some beautiful natural landscapes in America.

Weeping Willow, what's your catastrophe?  
     Red Red oak, oh, what's your worry?  
 Hairy Mammal whaddya want,  
     What more than a little graveyard  
         near the lake by airport road,  
 Electric towers marching to Hartford,  
     Buildingtops spiked in sky, (462)

Such phrases as “Weeping Willow,” “Red Red oak,” “a little graveyard” denote part of the natural landscapes. On the contrary, words like “electric towers,” “Buildingtops” indicate the artificial objects created in America. Furthermore, these factors form one unit in the line “Buildingtops spiked in sky.” In “What more than a little graveyard/near the lake by airport road” what is natural and what is artificial come together as well as is complicatedly intertwined with each other. The narrator gives us various kinds of landscapes with speedy expressions like a train, a bus, a car, an airplane. About the relationship between Ginsberg and these ways of

depicting landscapes, Helen Vendler refers to a great similarity between Ginsberg's way of describing and the traveling given in the work *The Poly-Olbion* (in 1612 and 1622) written by Michael Drayton.<sup>12</sup> Drayton's trip in the seventeenth century was, however, more leisurely. To this contrary, Ginsberg runs through the United States at full speed. With the intention of grasping the essential part of America, Ginsberg implies not only his way of describing but also his attitude against nature in his poem. This may show the narrator's view on the basis of "DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance" proposed in "Vorticism." For example, the question "what's your catastrophe?" is given to "Weeping Willow", and the question "what's your worry?" to "Red Red oak." Here, Ginsberg personifies natural landscapes in America. The case is true with the beginning of another poem "Autumn Gold: New England Fall," as in the following.

Yellow leaves in the wood,  
     Millions of redness,  
         gray skies over sandstone  
             outcroppings along the road —  
cows by yellow corn,  
     wheel-whine on granite,  
         White houseroofs, Connecticut woods  
             hanging under clouds —  
Autumn again, you wouldn't know in the city  
Gotta come out in a car see the birds  
     flock by the yellow bush —  
In Autumn, in autumn, this part of the planet's  
     famous for red leaves —  
Difficult for Man on earth to 'scape the snares of delusion —

The phrases like “Yellow leaves,” “Millions of redness,” “gray skies,” “yellow corn” represent colorful nature and its beauty and grandeur more prominent. In the lines “white houseroofs, Connecticut woods/hanging under clouds —,” white houseroofs are drooping down under the clouds. In other words the United States are hanging under the Earth. Here, we also realize that the narrator personifies nature. In short, he addresses “autumn” as “Autumn again, you wouldn’t know in the city” and expresses his true feeling in the poem, saying “Difficult for Man on earth to ‘scape the snares of delusion —.” What is worthy of notice is that the word “delusion” has a relation to the United States where a great number of lies have been manufactured. The media information and the Vietnam War created by the unreliable America are equal to “delusion” in the mind of the narrator. In the lines where the Vietnam War comes together, a kind of tense atmosphere caused by the conflict between nature and reality may be realized. This tension would involve the energy by which the natural landscapes in *The Fall of America* could be understood as more than the beautiful nature in America.

As evident from what has been mentioned above, *The Fall of America* is the poem where Ginsberg claimed his antiwar view against the Vietnam War. What is more important is that he disclosed the unpredictable aspects of the United States. This is more predominant in that Ginsberg described the landscapes in America based on the structure of “Vortex.” In that addition, Ginsberg heightened the effect of “Vortex” into the narrator’s consciousness. Ginsberg neither sentimentally depicted the beauty of nature nor sang the praises of nature. Ginsberg created the structure of “Vortex” in America. Moreover, he placed a great emphasis

on nature, which is considered to be a fragment of “Vortex.” The cruel reality embodied in the Vietnam War would be observed behind the beautiful nature in America. Ginsberg’s lines display the great tension that “Vortex” has produced. His poem tells us a journey of his consciousness as well as his travel over the United States. These two kinds of journeys are connected with each other, are intersected with each other, and are mingled with each other. Consequently the whole poem converges on the structure of “Vortex.”

Parts of media information are inserted in the poem. Ginsberg’s way of composing the poem is taken after the model of “DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance” declared in “Vorticism.” In consequence, the energy of “Vortex” projects “the physical and spiritual map of America” to the fore. The description of natural landscapes, the narrator’s consciousness, and the media information resonates with each other as a categorized factor. In short, “Vortex” has impelled Ginsberg to criticize the Vietnam War, visually and perceptively.

As Peter Makin points out, Ginsberg wrote many poems under the influence of Ezra Pound. Therefore, “real contact with experience and thought, and never at the borrowing of tokens and imitation of surfaces that made up the ‘well-made poem’”<sup>13</sup> is greatly reflected in the poem *The Fall of America*.

Although Allen Ginsberg is generally regarded as a poet of Post-Modernism, it may be said that he displays his own reality and experience in his own poem.

### Abbreviations

B1        *Blast* 1. Ed. Wyndham Lewis. 1997.

OCEL     *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Ed. Margaret Drabble.

1995.

### Notes

- 1 See *New York Times Book Review* (1973). Vender also says that “I like best the poems where Ginsberg is still visited by evanescent flashes of his humor, too often now in abeyance.”
- 2 About the arts movements, *OCEL* (1045) remarks as follows:  
     In the visual arts this revolutionary fervour was expressed in abstract compositions of bold lines, sharp angles, and planes; the Vorticist style was indebted to Cubism and Futurism, although Lewis mocked the Futurist obsession with speed.
- 3 “Futurism” occurs in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century as an artistic movement. They stress the sense of motion by the machine civilization, such as speed and noise.
- 4 According to Michael Schumacher (489), Ginsberg had a great respect for Pound as his “guru,” because he was familiar with Pound’s works since a student at Columbia University. He also remarks that Ginsberg wrote to Pound several times so that Ginsberg had a chance to meet Pound in Spoleto, Italy.
- 5 At that period several new artistic movements occur in Europe: “Impressionism” by Claud Monet and Camille Pissarro in France, “Cubism” by Paul Cézanne. These movements were established by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.
- 6 Bradford Morrow introduces the definition made by E. Pound and Gaudier Brzeka in the forward to *Blast 1* in 1997. Hugh Kenner shows us this definition as an excellent example.
- 7 In addition, Pound remarks as follows:  
     It [the vortex] represents, in mechanics, the greatest efficiency. We use the words ‘greatest efficiency’ in the precise sense — as they would be used in a text book of MECHANICS. (*BI* 153)
- 8 Vender deals with the poem as in the following:  
     [It]s [*The Fall of America*’s] natural rivers, mountains and coastlines, its man-made cities, superhighways, and dams, its media ..., its social life ..., its political activity ..., its poets and musicians ..., its mythology ..., its graffiti, its religion ..., its banks, its wars, its violence, its secret police, its history, its seasons — in short, the whole of our common life. This text of the common life is crossed, less often than one would wish, with the life of Ginsberg.
- 9 Johnson refers to the quagmire the Vietnam War caused during the periods when Kennedy and Johnson were in power.
- 10 Johnson states that *New York Times* and *Washington Post* gave up their support

to President Johnson at the beginning of 1966. And he adds that all the TV networks came to take a neutral position and later to have an objection to the Vietnam War.

- 11 Miles points out that Ginsberg took part in the group "Hell's Angels" in which the motorcycle gang had a great objection to the Vietnam War.
- 12 Drayton is an English poet. His poem *The Poly-Olbion* is highly regarded as "the most ambitious work."
- 13 About the influence of Pound upon literal movements in the 1950s, Makin (2006: 19) remarks as follows:

Pound now became the real literary parent of two major related movements of the 1950s: the Beats and the Black Mountain poets.

In addition, he refers to the relation between Pound and Ginsberg as in the following:

They took Pound as a teacher because of the freshness of his approach to the art of writing, which aimed at real contact with experience and thought, and never at the borrowing of tokens and imitation of surfaces that made up the "well-made poem." Pound's writings had an overwhelming influence on Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder and many others of their generation ....

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