



Allen's Oily Asphalt Empire State Postcard Exercise

The *Allen Ginsberg Estate* may be a textbook example of how to continue a poet's legacy long after their death. Allen definitely came out of the Ezra Pound school of prioritizing concrete images in poetry, exemplified by Pound's notion that *abstractions have to be earned*. It's not that it was a rule you could never put an abstraction into a poem, but if you did, it must be surrounded by enough concrete imagery so that it can ride along and not mire the poem in the logical/theoretical realm. Allen was tireless in his attempts to push students to go deeper into their own imaginations to give their poetry the power of which it was capable instead of settling for facile words and ideas. The power of actual objects. Objects with their own resonances, mythologies, connotations.

Poets of all levels of experience regularly fall into traps of rhetoric and other shortcuts that weaken the poem. As Charles Olson said in *Projective Verse*:



(105)

EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, NEW YORK CITY



And when the line has, is, a deadness, is it not a heart which has gone lazy; is it not, suddenly, slow things, similes, say, adjectives, or such, that we are bored by?

Yes, it is and you can train your mind to recognize in the act of composition how to avoid shortcuts which weaken the poem and cheat the poet out of an experience of their own personal mythology, allowing them to remain at a surface level of consciousness. Check out this master class in getting to the essence of one's own consciousness via a simple free associative exercise he did at Naropa utilizing the iconic Empire State Building. From the AG Project:

Allen Ginsberg's 1978 Naropa class on [Jack Kerouac's Mexico City Blues](#) featured an exercise that Allen liked to do – in-class improvisation – (see earlier examples [here](#) and [here](#))

AG: The Empire State Building... ?

Student (*David Patton*): The Empire State Building... has an unfulfilled dream at the end of the flagpole.

AG: Okay. But we can get something more concrete than “unfulfilled dream”?

Student (*DP*): Well, that is concrete though, (they originally panned) a zeppelin dock..

AG: Oh.

Student (*DP*): ... at the end of the flagpole.

AG: Well, then I'd say “An unfulfilled dream of zeppelins at the end of the flagpole. Or “The Empire State Building has a zeppelin dream at the end of the flagpole” would be the funniest of it – put it all together. The essential word – the zeppelin, the dream, (it's a dream – you'd say unfulfilled)- “The Empire State Building has a zeppelin dream at the end of a flagpole,” then you've got a really witty line.

Student (*Tiff Miller*): The Empire State Building of paper cups with holes in the bottom.



Student: The Empire State Building (houses a) popcorn theatre.

Student: The Empire State Building has soap bubbles for windows.

Student: The Empire State Building is made of bandaged dust.

AG: Bandaged dust? That's pretty good. You got the point. Bandaged dust. And that's real there is such a thing as bandaged dust.

Student: The Empire State Building has old gum stuck on the bottom.

AG: Of?

Student: It.

AG: Its desks. Old gum stuck on the bottom of its desks or something, or maybe "it."

Student: Stuck on the sidewalk with gum.

AG: Okay.

Student: The Empire State Building rocks half-drunk

AG: Half-drunk on what?

Student: (on drink)

AG: I'd put "The Empire State Building rocks half-drunk on Monday champagne," or something. Something a little... complete it don't leave a hole in terms of the rhythm and in terms of the picture. Do you know what I mean? Just try and complete it so that it's all solid all the way through. "Endless grape dirigible stars" there's something complete and final about it. It's opaque, but it's complete. So when you're making up a thing like that, try and round it off with some concrete little thing at the end. So you don't have to...so that it would be impossible to ask a question, you know, what kind of drunk? So knocked-out crazy that you...

Student: The Empire State Building (serves) the window-washers' cocktails. Complete.

AG: Okay. Yes.

[Peter Orlovsky](#): I like to meditate in the Empire State Building for two hours in 1990



AG: Oh, yeah. That's completed it. See, it needed something like that "in 1990." The whole thought process needed to close itself by proving it was possibly impossible until 1990, and making itself a little prophecy. By saying "1990" it makes a little prophecy. Dig? And if you prophesy something like that, some kid'll see that and think it's funny and he'll go and meditate there in 1990.

Student: The Empire State Building is the legacy of the dull grandmother.

AG: Okay. Legacy.

PO: The leg of a grandmother.

AG: Yeah. You need something. Legacy was a little bit abstract, see? You needed something like "leg" or, I was going to think of it ... what was it? Is there another word we could have for "legacy"? Can you think of another one? "Dull grandmother" will do. "Dull" is a little....

PO: Abortion?

AG: No. Can you think of another word for..... what you meant by "legacy"?

Student: Well, I haven't the vaguest idea what I meant.

AG: So free-associate by "legacy." Or "legacy of a dull grandmother."

Student (2): You could (say)..."expensive stupidity"

AG: What does dull grandmother spend her money on, (besides Empire State Buildings)?

Student: Indulgent grandchildren?.

AG: Ah. Well, "indulgent" you have again. But she indulges and they indulge ... What do they indulge in?

Student: Meditating in 1990.

AG: What?

Student: Not that.

AG: Well, (what do) dull grandchildren and dull grandmothers indulge in? What sort of things? (either material things or behaviour activities.)?

Student: What sort of things do they do? Well...



AG: Dull grandmothers best.

Student: The dull grandmothers themselves?

AG: Yeah.

Student: The great pleasure of dull grandmothers is to spend money.

AG: On what?, please.

Student: On the ... a lot of times, on the desire of the grandchildren.

AG (*increasingly frustrated*): Will you please give me an example of a desire in material form of a grandmother or a grandchild and stop generalizing!!

PO: Chocolate, sweets, candies.

AG: No, Peter, it's from him.

Student: Cheap sex.

AG: (to PO): It's from his head, not from yours!.

Student: Well, cowboy suits.

AG: Okay. So "The Empire State Building is the cowboy suit of a dull grandmother." That's simple. Something like that. In other words, get the concrete thing. "The Empire State Building is the cowboy suit of a dull grandmother" would be dazzling.

So what you do is you fill in the blank of a generalization. "Indulgence" (doesn't have) a concrete-enough clock to it as a word. (*to Student*) Does that make sense at all? Despite my screaming.?

Student: Oh, scream away.

AG: Okay. I just want to get to that point because the whole point is concreteness — composing the image of out concrete elements — you know, pipes, toes, cowboy suits. The thing I was thinking of was a tea caddy or something like that. A tea setting. A silver tea set or serving tea in the afternoon. Dull grandmothers. Cookie or.. I don't know what kind of cookies dull grandmothers serve, but I was wondering what your dull grandmother, or in your mind a dull grandmother would come up with as an artifact. It's artifact s(is) what I mean by concrete things. Go on.



Student: The Empire State Building is ...

AG: Anything that pops in your mind.

Student: ... alright, a little boy's erector set dream.

Student: The Empire State Building is a grand amount of a billion tons of oily asphalt.

AG: Oh, that's not bad. "A billion tons of oily asphalt" is good sound. "A billion tons of oily asphalt." The assonance is nice "billion tons of oily asphalt." So that's good. So you do it on the sound, actually. That's the key to get (or) arrive at the particulars by going along the waves of the vowel sounds. By hearing vowel sounds and accepting the vowel sounds that are concretions.

Were you just making it up just then?

Student: Not really.

AG: The billion tons of oily asphalt.

Student: Yes and no.

AG: Did you write it last year or something?

Student: No, no, oh yeah, just in the last few seconds there.

AG: Okay, but where did you get the "asphalt"? At what point did the "asphalt" come?

Student: The "asphalt" came by knowing that the Empire State Building is so far away from here to get there you got to... for me, you know...

AG: Yeah.

Student:: go on..the road and ...

AG: Oh, I see.

Student: ... and that's where the asphalt...."

AG: But when did it come to you, the "asphalt"? While you were composing the sentence? Or had you the "asphalt" before?

Student: a way before.

AG: You mean it came as the last thing in your mind? Or the next to the last? Did it come before "oily"?

Student: Um, yes.



AG: And then when did you think of “oily”?

Student: When did I think of “oily”?

AG: I think “oily”....

Student: “Oily” is the last thought.

AG: Yeah, I think “oily” is the best. I mean it was the thing that made it most vivid to me. When you got to “oily” I thought, “That’s got to be a winner, no matter what he says. Even if he says ‘oily air’ or something.” But to have concretized it into asphalt I thought was great. Brian?

Student: (*Brian*): The Empire State Building is full of (oily frogs)

AG: Olive frogs?

Student ([Randy Roark](#)): The Empire State Building is a linoleum suitcase.

AG: Rosalie?

Student (*Rosalie Robison*): The Empire State Building is filled with ice cream..

AG: Um.

Student: The Empire State Building is a moon chord

AG: Moon chord? That’s nice.

Of all of them the “oily asphalt” seems to be the one that related what was the most far-out but at the same time the most near-in. Far-out in the sense of verbal construction and oddness near-in in the sense of direct relation to what we were talking about the Empire State Building. The dirigible dream was related. The frog wasn’t very much related, I didn’t think. And a couple of others weren’t related. The thing is to think along the lines of the technique, because it’s a definite technique. You think along the lines of free association what rises in your mind related to the Empire State Building. And that free association rides along like one of those bobsled races along the channels of vowels. Slides along on....

Audio for the above can be heard [here](#), beginning at approximately eighty-two-and-a-half minutes in and concluding at the end of the tape



EXERCISE

Pick an iconic structure from your youth and write a list poem featuring free associative notions of what it is. Being born in Chicago I could use the Sears Tower or John Hancock buildings, one of which was for a time the tallest building in the world & which now has a different name I don't bother to look up because I'd prefer to stay in the era where my own associations live. The fact that these iconic buildings change names based on whims of capitalist marketing practices might come up in the poem.

Or I could choose something from my own backyard (& bioregion since 1988) like the Space Needle. It'd help to do some research about the ideas that led to the construction of the Needle, *such as who really designed it* and about the culture at the time, focused on the Space Race, the competition with the Russians (were they EVER a credible threat) & the culture here in Seattle of supersonic transport, Boeing & thus modernity & all its promises which by now should be clear have failed us & ushered in the anthropocene.

Use the process like Allen did, repeating the mantra: "The Space Needle is..." and keep letting your mind wander further and further out. As in any list poem that features *anaphora*, it helps to vary line length as Joe Brainard demonstrated masterfully in the *I Remember* series. Or as his friend Frank O'Hara said:

I'm not saying that I don't have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today; but what difference does that make? They're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when refreshment arrives.

When you've written enough of the poem that you are sufficiently refreshed, stop, read it aloud to yourself & feel if you missed anything.