"Microscope" — A Lost Poem by Louis Ginsberg

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Microscopists know that the world is both big and small.

Every year I take my light microscopy class to the Rare & Manuscript Collections at Kroch Library of Cornell University. David Corson, the curator of the History of Science Collections, shares his knowledge and love of books and science with my students. He makes it possible for my students to travel through time when he shows them Robert Hooke’s Micrographia (published in 1665), Christian Huygens’ Traité de la lumière (1690), Isaac Newton’s Opticks, or, A treatise of the reflections, inflections and colours of light (1704), Henry Baker’s The microscope made easy (1741), George Adam’s Micrographia illustrata (1746), his son George’s Essays on the microscope (1787), Thomas Young’s A course of lectures on natural philosophy and the mechanical arts (1807) and many other books on light and microscopy.

David usually brings in a surprise or two each year. This year he brought in the 17th edition of The Microscope by Simon Henry Gage, who was my predecessor in teaching light microscopy at Cornell. The book was a signed presentation copy for Émile M. Chamot, who taught chemical microscopy to Walter C. McCrone at Cornell University. When we opened Gage’s book, we noticed that a poem titled “Microscope” by Louis Ginsberg was cut from a newspaper and pasted into the book.

"Microscope" is a beautiful poem that captures the small and large world that microscopists know so well. Seeing that the poet’s name was Louis Ginsberg, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was related to Beat poet Allen Ginsberg (author of the epic “Howl”). He is. Louis Ginsberg is Allen’s father.

I got the Collected Poems of Louis Ginsberg, which was edited by Michael Fournier (Northern Lights: Orono, ME, 1992) but noticed that the poem that was pasted into Chamot’s copy of Gage’s book did not appear in the Collected Poems. Instead, there was an
epigram with the same title:

Microscope

The more man delves
Into the dark,
The more he enlarges
A question-mark.

Bent like a question
And wonder-eyed,
Man peers at himself,
Magnified.

I wrote to Michael Fournier asking him if he knew
of the poem. He did not, and for that reason, I am happy
that it will appear for all to see here in The Microscope

Louis Ginsberg’s
Collected Poems, edited
by Michael Fournier
(Northern Lights), doesn’t
contain the poem pasted in
Gage’s book but includes
an epigram also titled
“Microscope” (left).
And, oh yes, I bought the Collected Poems by Louis Ginsberg online for a few dollars, and to my joy, I found that it had been autographed by his son, Allen Ginsberg. It sure is a big and a small world. I thank David Corson for showing me the book, Michael Fournier for his help in trying to find the original newspaper source of the poem and Peter Wittich for photographing the poem.

Editor's note: Randy Wayne also submitted the following poem by Robert Frost:

A Considerable Speck
(Microscopic)

A speck that would have been beneath my sight
On any but a paper sheet so white
Set off across what I had written there.
And I had idly poised my pen in air
To stop it with a period of ink
When something strange about it made me think,
This was no dust speck by my breathing blown,
But unmistakably a living mite
With inclinations it could call its own.
It paused as with suspicion of my pen,
And then came racing wildly on again
To where my manuscript was not yet dry;
Then paused again and either drank or smelt—
With loathing, for again it turned to fly.
Plainly with an intelligence I dealt.
It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
Yet must have had a set of them complete
To express how much it didn't want to die.
It ran with terror and with cunning crept.
It faltered: I could see it hesitate;
Then in the middle of the open sheet
Cower down in desperation to accept
Whatever I accorded it of fate.
I have none of the tenderer-than-thou
Collectivist regimenting love
With which the modern world is being swept.
But this poor microscopic item now!
Since it was nothing I knew evil of
I let it lie there till I hope it slept.

I have a mind myself and recognize
Mind when I meet with it in any guise
No one can know how glad I am to find
On any sheet the least display of mind.