

## “woke on a sudden Manhattan”

### *Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' / Beating on Divine Doors*

Hi all. I'm talking today about the most widely-read poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - and certainly one of my favourites - Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Along with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, *Howl* is one of the cornerstones of the literary movement known then and now as the Beat Generation. Its release and early performances were watershed moments in American literature, helping to found the collective consciousness of an idiosyncratic, individualist generation in the midst of Cold War anxieties. In the partisan aftermath of World War II, marked at both ends by McCarthyite witch-hunts and the rigid formalisms of the Columbia literary establishment, *Howl* was a defiant burst of San Francisco colour. The anxieties of romantics and moderns were given a streetwise, eminently human voice, which only compounded their force. Fear of the machine, the inside-outs of frightening love, and obsession with the transcendent – these tropes echo at the centre of *Howl*, and ensure its continued relevance. I'll talk briefly about the historical context, so bound up in the poem's proto-confessional form, before venturing into my own reading of the piece, examining *Howl's* treatment of libidinal bonds towards enlightenment in a hopeless age.

One of the things that strike you, in going over the material on Ginsberg, is a certain critical paucity – the emphasis stays firmly on biographical details, socio-political contexts and Beat Generation mythos. It's evident that *Howl* changed the culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but no one wants to talk about how it did so. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, in contrast to the obscurity often favoured by modern poets of the time, Ginsberg's themes are fairly straightforward. Secondly, the poem is so situated in the rhythms of 1955 that knowledge of its history is unavoidable; the poem is so saturated in people, places and references that it teaches you as you go. In a series of vignettes, which build in their sheer repetition, *Howl* bombards us with 1955. Finally, the thematic insistence on a defiantly particular knowledge of the universal, the lonely souls

who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated (1996, p49)

is something which resists the appropriation of scholarship. To reduce *Howl* to an assortment of literary techniques is to divest it of its eminence. So before we do that, let's honour the poem's wish that we keep weaving the myth around it.

Ginsberg, still unknown at the time, debuted *Howl* at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1955, becoming a success overnight. Jonah Raskin describes the mindset of the poets assembled:

What they had in common was a profound love of poetry, a belief in the vitality and integrity of their own work, and a deep discontent with the militarism and materialism of American civilisation. They were all spiritual seekers of one sort or another, and they all were willing to take personal risks – to experiment not only with poetry but with politics, drugs and sex. And, though they ascribed to very different ideas about death and rebirth, nature and civilisation, they were bound together by a love of ancient myths and a penchant for transforming those myths to create new myths about the world. (p16)

This meeting was a microcosm of the Beat Generation as a whole. The folkloric figures of all-American Kerouac, junkie-grandfather Burroughs, and Ginsberg's love-object Neal Cassady, who "drank, stole, read Nietzsche, fucked like a machine and drove great distances" (Gornick, 2006, p5) were pillars of the literary movement. This batshit insane conflation of reckless experimentation, embracing "homosexuality, jazz, dope-addiction and vagrancy" (p5), with the highest ideals of enlightenment and beatitude, understandably lit a few fires. But as Kerouac put it, "they were here to *rescue* America (from corporate death and atomic bomb politics), not destroy her" (p5).

So let's look at *Howl* in this vein. In Part I, we see an unyielding series of self-contained nightmare narratives, quilted by the opening line "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked" and by the "anaphoric" repetition of the word "who" (Lee, p383). This "madness" is a cocktail of both catharsis and frustration – for everyone who "bared their brains to Heaven", there is another "expelled from the academies" for everyone who "thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy" there is another that "howled on their in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts" (p49-51). There's a profound ambivalence surrounding each instance, in which the inchoate "Howl" of the Real is encountered time and again. To this howl is joined the voices of the best mad minds:

[who] rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio (p54)

The ambivalence builds to anguish, as the quest towards enlightenment results either in failure or an encounter with world-ending madness. But what is borne out of Ginsberg's 'chronicle' is what Lee describes as "an impression of expansive yet publicly unacknowledged collectivity" (p382).

What divine is this, then, that offers no reintegration of the alienated soul? The force that thwarts or takes the place of enlightenment is called “Moloch”. Now Moloch has been called everything under the sun in the last fifty years, but is understood by anarcho-Leftist Mitch Cunningham (and his friend Zizek, 2008, p226-227) as that sinthome stain at the heart of ideology, the master signifier who, unchallenged, encompasses the whole breadth of ideological thought:

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities! (p54)

Against this ideologically-saturated world, where skyscrapers and factories are invested with human qualities like holiness and dreaming, Ginsberg argues that the master signifier is, of course, arbitrary:

They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! (p55)

The distance between the self and enlightenment cannot be navigated through recourse to ideological investment. Lifting Moloch to Heaven, subordinating oneself to the master signifier, will only break one’s back. Thus the position of the best minds is rearticulated:

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! The wild eyes! The holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street! (p55)

The alienation suffered by Ginsberg’s heroes, the jumping “Down to the river! into the street!” is the product of a self-immolation, willed by those subjects who “saw it all!” and could not quilt “it” into their orthodoxies. For these Beat souls there must be a (perhaps temporary) escape from their own unanswerable questions – a cynicism, a nihilism, a psychosis!

In 1949, Ginsberg met Carl Solomon in the New York State Psychiatric Institute, an encounter which formed the nucleus of *Howl*. Part III of the poem pines for and celebrates their friendship amidst the walls of Rockland, affirming Ginsberg’s view of the soul in my favourite line:

I’m with you in Rockland

where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed mad-house

and culminating in a vision of redemption through the strength of interpersonal bonds:

I’m with you in Rockland

in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America  
in tears to the front door of my cottage in the Western night

These dreams of the alienated soul, reintegrated into society through empathy, fraternal love and the sublime fact of being, reverberate throughout the poem, reshaping what has come before in a classic twist of syntax. Mark Doty (2006) has this to say on the matter:

*Howl*, considered in 2005, seems, more than ever, a poem of visionary friendship, of the longing to be part of a questing (albeit erratic) company. It's a chronicle of friends seeking – take your pick, satori, godhead, enlightenment, transcendence, the permanent ecstatic – through whatever means they find at hand [...] Such longing, and such hammering of the individual in quest of the whole, takes place against a particularly unyielding background [...] America actively seeks to resist, tame, jail, medicate or hospitalise them. What is not of the mainstream seems illicit and sick, as if their longing for firsthand experience of the divine is itself criminal (p7)

So in considering the “radical” nature of the Beats, we ought not consider the recklessness of their behaviour, but the purity of their impulse - expressed in their writings which subsume narcissism, insufferable hipsterism, self-harm and hallucinogens into narratives of longing, exploration and reintegration.

This, then, is my introduction to the Beats through a fairly straight, contextualised reading of Ginsberg's *Howl*. If anyone's got questions about Beat Generation history, I can certainly spin a story or two (satisfaction not guaranteed). Otherwise, I have a few questions for general discussion. Imagine yourself in a socially repressive regime, if you don't already. What is your response to the machinations of power – cynicism, nihilism, madness? Do you think that the recklessness of the Beat Generation, the drugs, the sex and the crime, can be considered a path to enlightenment? And how do you think literature, *Howl* in particular, functions in this process?

**Further Reading**

Ginsberg, A, Shinder, J, Gornick, V, Doty, M, Baraka, A, 2006, 'The poem that changed America: *Howl* fifty years later', *American Poetry Review*, March/April 2006

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Miles, B, 1989, *Ginsberg: A biography*, Simon and Schuster, New York

Miles, B, 1993, *William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible*, Virgin Books, London

Raskin, J, 2004, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' and the making of the Beat Generation*, University of California Press, USA

Zizek, S, 2008, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, Routledge Classics, New York