

Anand Sekar

Navid Ebrahimzadeh

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Ginsberg's *Howl*: A Hallowed Ideology

Allen Ginsberg, the indubitable founder of the beat movement, was infamous for shaking the foundations of American social, political, and spiritual grounds. His poem *Howl* was criticized – to the extent of going on trial to be banned for obscenity – as a disgusting attack on the core of American society. A glance at any section of the poem will show the graphic and vulgar expressions of darkness, mechanization, sexuality, and death. Although Ginsberg certainly had the intention and effect of obscenity, buried underneath the dirt of his text lies gold – a rare instantiation of spiritual rebellion amongst a monolithic environment. How are post-war American social and spiritual standards portrayed by Ginsberg in *Howl*? In what form do these standards manifest, and how is this form shattered, twisted, or reshaped? It is quite possible that *Howl* is, rather than just a rudimentary outrage of absurdity intended to shock and disrupt, a non-standard, novel spiritual ideology.

Howl is split into three sections, with a final “footnote” serving as an additional section. Part I begins by addressing the subjects of his commentary: “the best minds of my generation, destroyed by madness,” and each following stanza directly refers to this subject as one monstrous sentence (*Howl* 9). Explicitly dark and sexual imageries are divulged, but with spiritual innuendos: “Poverty” followed by “Heaven... Mohammedan angels,” “[who let them be fucked in the ass by] saintly motorecyclists” followed by “human seraphim,” “drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality” followed by “a vision to find out Eternity,” with mentions of “hopeless cathedrals,” “salvation,” “the soul illuminated,” and “Buddha” (*Howl*). Past a simple glance,

spirituality isn't generally affirmed nor rejected; rather it is bisected and contrasted. While the oxymoron of "hopeless cathedrals," directly mocks the most conventional spirituality, instances of the most unconventional spirituality are conveyed in a contrasting, hopeful tone. In this first part, Ginsberg disparages current spiritual standards, and focuses on exposing the sanctity found within what is considered sin.

Part II first asks "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls...?" and answers with "Moloch!" repeated forty times, fraught with the imagery of the well-known, archetypal "machine" (*Howl* 21). Moloch is an ancient Caananite God, a towering pillar to which children were sacrificed. However, this "Nightmare of Moloch," is also "Moloch in whom I dream Angels...who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am consciousness without a body!" (*Howl* 22). There is seemingly a stark contradiction here – between good and epitomized evil, sanctity and sin. Or is it not a contradiction? Is this a widely misperceived duality which Ginsberg wishes to break? Ginsberg writes, "They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven...which exists and is everywhere about us" (*Howl* 22). "They" isn't specified in any single phrase, but can be safely assumed as the conglomeration of the previous list, i.e. American society. Ginsberg, again, connects Moloch – the epitome of darkness – to Heaven – the epitome of goodness. Furthermore, he states that it is everywhere – even in the sceneries portrayed in Part I. At this point, one conditioned by common social norms may conclude that Ginsberg is simply throwing out the idea of spirituality and morality absolutely and entirely; that he makes no distinction between good or bad, and dismisses everything. Such a perspective is expected, but flawed. This erroneous interpretation will be addressed later.

Part III addresses Carl Solomon, the more exemplary subject of *Howl*, repeating "I'm with you in Rockland" nearly twenty times (*Howl* 24). The footnote to *Howl* begins by

exclaiming “Holy!” fifteen times consecutively, then proceeds to state literally everything as – even things that may not seem as – holy, repeating the word over sixty times. *Howl* is succinctly articulated in Ginsberg’s notes: “Part I, a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamblike youths; Part II names the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb; Part III a litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory” (“Notes” 82). The archetype of the lamb is used widely in spiritual terms, indicating the presence of an archetypal shepherd; of course, the archetypal monster of the lamb is already mentioned as Moloch. If Ginsberg’s poem is a spiritual assertion to any degree, then there must be a subject: “the lamblike youths,” who need to be further identified.

Ginsberg, along with other founders of the beat movement, call these lambs “the fellaheen.” Stephen Prothero, in his article, “The Holy Road: The Beat Movement as a Spiritual Protest,” includes a section titled “A Preferential Option for the Fellaheen.” Prothero quotes Ginsberg defining the fellaheen:

In his anonymity & holy Creephood in New York he was the sensitive vehicle for a veritable new consciousness...in the grand karma of robotic Civilizations it may be that the humblest, most afflicted, most persecuted, most suffering lowly junkie...is the initiate of a Glory transcending his Nation’s consciousness that will swiftly draw that Nation to its knees in tearful self-forgiveness (Prothero 213).

Investigating the lives of the working class, Ginsberg strayed from “a more absurdist and apocalyptic reading of the ‘new vision,’ (beat as in beat down)” and moved towards “some redemptive force or transcendental hope (beat as in beatitude)” (Prothero 213-214). This intention is present within *Howl*: as the sheep are the fellaheen defined above, the monster is Moloch as the robotic civilization, and the entirety of *Howl* contributes to the beatitude. The

aforementioned fallacious perspective of spiritual dualities in Part II is addressed in Prothero's statement: "In the beat cosmos God is both absent and everywhere. Dualisms between sacred and profane...do not hold" (Prothero 219). Therefore, any critic deeming *Howl* to simply represent one side of a spectrum of society is wrong. With respect to *Howl*, Ginsberg himself addresses, after his "word on the Academies" who criticized his form, the politicians who criticized his content:

A word on the Politicians: my poetry is Angelical Ravings, and has nothing to do with the dull materialistic vagaries about who should shoot who. The secrets of the individual imagination – which are transconceptual and non-verbal – I mean Unconditional Spirit – are not for sale to this consciousness...The universe is a new flower. America will be discovered. Who wants a war against roses will have it. Fate tells big lies, and the gay Creator dances on his own body in Eternity ("Notes," 83).

It is quite definite – given Ginsberg's inextricable involvement with the spiritually-involved beat movement, his commentary on *Howl* responding to critics, and a dissection of *Howl* itself – that there are both spiritual intentions and effects in *Howl*. More specifically, a relatively novel ideology is suggested. A general – and more Western – view of societal mores is shaped like a spectrum: "good" on one side and "evil" on the other. The concept of holiness, per this spectrum, is only accessible by reaching the end of the "good" side. Again, it is erroneous to assume Ginsberg, through *Howl*, distorts this shape to the extent that it has no conceivable form; that it is paradoxical or meaningless. What, then, does Ginsberg do? Ginsberg simply makes the concept of holiness more accessible – not by one end of the spectrum – but by all ends. In Part I of *Howl*, Ginsberg insinuates the instances of holiness present within the lower-end of society; in Part II he connects Moloch to Heaven, and in Part III states that holiness is everywhere (thus

accessible). Why does Ginsberg do this? The answer is present in Gregory Stephenson's reading of *Howl* in which he states:

The anguish of the visionary in exile from Ultimate Reality and desperately seeking reunion with it, is intensified by a society which refuses to recognize the validity of the visionary experience and maintains a monopoly on reality, imposing and enforcing a single, materialist-rationalist view (Stephenson 388).

Ginsberg is, in a slightly reductive sense, rebelling against the monster of a system (Moloch), but more importantly, he is fighting for the lamblike youth by showing them that the way out isn't at the top, it's also at the bottom; in this sense, Ginsberg represents the archetypal guiding shepherd. How does he do this? In Section II Ginsberg mentions "Moloch in whom I am consciousness without a body" (*Howl* 22). These concepts: the aforementioned separation of consciousness and the body; the Eastern religious influences of the beat movement; and the rejection of dualities all point towards the use of transcendentalism. Transcendentalism is simply the ascension from the material to the spiritual – escaping society; this is analogous to "ascending" from Earth to Heaven. What if one were to "descend" the other direction? In Western terms, one would end up in Hell. In Ginsberg's terms, one would still end up in Heaven; and per the superficial, repulsive portrayal of *Howl*, this philosophy would indicate that we are already in a sort of sadistic hell. At the same time, holiness is said to be everywhere; in order for this to remain non-paradoxical, this may more specifically mean that holiness is accessible everywhere. Traditional transcendentalism, Western or Eastern, creates a barrier between the material and spiritual; and places this barrier at one end of the social spectrum. *Howl* breaks this barrier – purported by Moloch – and places the spiritual (the Holy) at the other end, making it available to the subjects of the poem – the fellaheen.

Ultimately, it becomes apparent that *Howl*, a poem infamous for its absurdity, is a benevolent spiritual ideology: one that serves every human being in our society, including those who may be considered the lowest, or even those who may not be considered in our society at all. I have only identified this functional aspect of *Howl*, and the target market whom it serves; and as a result of investigation I have also identified the core structure of Ginsberg's spiritual path as an augmentation to transcendentalism. However, this path, although present, is still not yet defined. Due to the plethora of Eastern-influenced works written by Ginsberg, and other members of the interconnected beat movement, and their own commentaries, this path can be found. This essay can serve as a fundamental foundation, based off *Howl*, on which to begin such an endeavor.

Works Consulted

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