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The dramatic imagery of “Howl”: the [naked] bodies of madness

George Rodosthenous

...the suffering of America’s naked mind for love
into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani
saxophone cry that shivered the cities
 (“Howl”, 1956)

Unlike Arthur Rimbaud who wrote his “A Season in Hell” (1873) when he was only 19 years old, Allen Ginsberg was 29 when he completed his epic poem “Howl” (1956). Both works encapsulate an intense world created by the imagery of words and have inspired and outraged their readers alike. What makes “Howl” relevant to today, 50 years after its first reading, is its honest and personal perspective on life, and its nearly journalistic, but still poetic, approach to depicting a world of madness, deprivation, insanity and jazz. And in that respect, it would be sensible to point out the similarities of Rimbaud’s concerns with those of Ginsberg’s. They both managed to create art that changed the *status quo* of their times and confessed their nightmares in a way that inspired future generations. Yet there is a stark contrast here: for Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell” was his swan song; fortunately, in the case of Ginsberg, he continued to write for decades longer, until his demise in 1997.

Even if more than three quarters of a century had elapsed following Rimbaud’s publication of his “catabasis” to hell, even if the world had been changed by two global conflicts, the rebellious concerns of Ginsberg seem similar to the ones that had engaged that youthful visionary of the previous century. In each instance, there was an urgent need to run away from the system, flee the routine, engineer a strategy of escapism through art. This escapist impulse represented a life that could be lived to its full intensity, with no rules and

regulations, with excesses and boundary-less excursion. Ginsberg's world is full of dramatic imagery, "sound and fury" which attack the reader and enclose him in a claustrophobic environment of people who are in desperate need of a change – a personal revolution. In order to discuss the ways I approached the reading of "Howl", I borrowed some of Michael McClure's impressions of the poem as sub-headings for my article. Also, for the purposes of this publication, I will limit my discussion only to the first part of "Howl".

New intensity

Allen began in a small and intensely lucid voice. At some point Jack Kerouac began shouting "GO" in cadence as Allen read it. In all our memories no one had been so outspoken by poetry before – we had gone beyond a point of no return – and we were ready for it, for a point of no return.

(McClure, 1982, p13)

The intensity of the visual imagery of "Howl" is undeniable. Even 50 years later, the reader is bombarded with explosions of images, some of an explicit nature. It would be fascinating to try and imagine the reaction on the faces of those 150 or so gathered in October 1955 to listen to this work for the first time. The sounds of the words are translated into images with such strength and the images become a synaesthetic experience which opens up the worlds of juxtaposed dreams and nightmares. The musical references play an integral part in this verbal stream of consciousness. The rhythms of the sounds, the hypnotic and, at times, seductive colour of the images provide the canvas on which a chapter in American history is drawn in a most provocative, shameless and unapologetic way. The barrage of images could, at first, be suffocating, but the after-taste of "Howl"'s opening section is

the soothing image of a lonely solo saxophone. The saxophone is the representative of solitude "...What solitude I've finally inherited" (Ginsberg, "Siesta in Xbalba", 1954) and its loneliness doubles up as the representative of an individual spiritual revolution. With its cry, the saxophone states its own manifesto against society and the norm. This image echoes the passage from Kerouac's *On the Road* where,

The tenorman jumped down from the platform and stood in the crowd, blowing around; his hat was over his eyes; somebody pushed it back for him. He just hauled back and stamped his foot and blew down a hoarse bawling blast, and drew breath, and raised the horn and blew high, wide, and screaming in the air. Dean was directly in front of him and with his face lowered to the bell of the horn, pouring sweat on the man's keys, and the man noticed and laughed in his horn a long quivering crazy laugh, and everybody else laughed as they rocked and rocked; and finally the tenorman decided to blow his top and crouched down and held a note in high C for a long time as everything else crashed along and the cries increased and I thought the cops would come swarming from the nearest precinct. Dean was in a trance. The tenorman's eyes were fixed straight on him; he had a madman who not only understood but cared and wanted to understand more and much more than there was, and they began dueling for this...

(1957, p197)

The detailed description of the music night-scene must have given a visual impulse to many artists (and probably to Anthony Minghella for his famous jazz-club scene in the 1999 film *The Talented Mr Ripley*) where through the intensity of experiencing live music, the act of listening itself cements the

male bonding of the characters. This homosocial activity counter-balances the lack of the homosocial activity of sport.

The saxophone cry breaks the boundaries and elates the atmosphere to one of anarchic intensity, power and muscular masculinity. It is identified with freedom from “serious” classical musical and elevates improvisation into a valid art form which, even though is difficult to document and preserve (because it can only exist in the moment), is tremendous to experience. And, in part, that was the novelty of the Beat Generation.

Escapism – visionary [musical] voices of freedom

None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellectual void – to the land without poetry – to the spiritual drabness. We wanted to make it new and we wanted to invent it and the process of it as we went into it. We wanted voice and we wanted vision.

(McClure, 1982, p13)

Ginsberg was opposed to the militaristic silence of the non-rebel and other kinds of discipline enforced by the system. He, like his other fellow contemporary poets, preferred the expressive freedom of jazz music. The rhythm of the military drum becomes the swinging brush of the jazz band. The structural monotony of military silence is transformed, instead, into the extreme freedom of improvisation, where everything is acceptable, the rules are there to be broken and to be re-invented on the way. A mistake can be changed to an intentional feature of the work, repeated, developed, discarded or abandoned. In that respect, his work is full of rhythms, cadences and solo extemporisations on specific themes: the liberation of the lustful body is what he described most explicitly and celebrated throughout his life.

Rimbaud, in his “A Season in Hell” acknowledged the need of the younger generations to break free from the constraints of society, to travel and experience new truths. Whether Ginsberg is regarded as prophet or punk, the tie that connects the two poets is their determination to change the poetry of their age by reflecting on personal experiences and honing them to become diachronic pieces of ‘diary art’. These voices became the leading voices of freedom of their generation and created their own ‘school of thought’ which tried to change the *status quo* through poetry and the power of the words.

Ginsberg also acknowledges the power of music in his determination to up-turn the world. In “Howl”, he writes about people “who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and rose up to build harpsichords in their lofts”, and “who sang out of their windows in despair”. The power of music to bring social change and improvement, the power of being able to look at the past, represented in the poem by the harpsichord, re-build it and then with that knowledge and experience of tradition create new works of art is essential for any culture. The musical imagery creates its own dialectic and invites the reader to think of sounds to accompany his reading of the poem. So, a reading of “Howl” is not only embellished with saxophone sounds, but with the sounds of harpsichords being built, tuned and played and sad (ethnic) songs are sung to create the new voices which will cry out for freedom. The music works on a sub-conscious level within the rhythm of the poem and adds colour and dissonance with “pushcarts full of onions and bad music”: a contemporary hymn to freedom.

Unveiling the unspoken

At a reading... in Los Angeles... one particular heckler harassed Ginsberg throughout his reading [of “Howl”] and was quieted only when Allen promised to give him the chance to express his opinions after the reading. However he continued to disrupt the reading after Allen had turned it over to [Gregory] Corso. At one point, Gregory

proposed a verbal duel with the heckler, the winner being the one with the best “images, metaphors (and) magic”. The heckler was more interested in engaging Corso in a fistfight. He taunted the poets, calling them cowards, insisting they explain what they were trying to prove onstage.

“Nakedness,” Ginsberg replied. When the heckler demanded further explanation, Allen left the stage and approached him. He accused the man of wanting to do something brave in front of the audience and then challenged him to take off all his clothes. As he walked towards the drunk, Allen stripped off all of his clothing, hurling his pants and shirt at the now retreating heckler. “Stand naked before the people,” Allen said. “The poet always stands naked before the world”. Defeated the man backed into another room.

(Schumacher, 1992, p242)

It is no surprise that the *Times Literary Supplement* has written that “[n]o one has made his poetry speak for the whole man, without inhibition of any kind, more than Ginsberg”. He had this gift of exploring the deepest fantasies and sharing them with his reader in a hypnotic way, which no other versifier has done since the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933) at the beginning of the 20th Century. Cavafy was more discrete in his writing, but one of his main recurring themes was the body remembering erotic experiences of the past:

Body, remember not only how much you were loved
not only the beds you lay on.
but also those desires glowing openly
in eyes that looked at you,
trembling for you in voices -
only some chance obstacle frustrated them.
Now that it's all finally in the past,
it seems almost as if you gave yourself
to those desires too - how they glowed,

remember, in eyes that looked at you,
remember, body, how they trembled for you in those voices

(“Body remember”, 1919)

It could be argued that Ginsberg even borrows some of Cavafy’s meta-poetical narrative where the erotic experience is documented as soon as it takes place. The Greek poet’s imagery leaves no ambiguity regarding the intentions and content of the activities described:

Their illicit pleasure has been fulfilled.
They get up and dress quickly, without a word.
They come out of the house separately, furtively;
and as they move off down the street a bit unsettled,
it seems they sense that something about them betrays
what kind of bed they've just been lying on.
But what profit for the life of the artist:
tomorrow, the day after, or years later, he'll give voice
to the strong lines that had their beginning here.

(“Their beginning”, 1921)

Ginsberg’s “Love Poem on a Theme by Whitman” (1954), “Many Loves” (1956) and “Please Master” (1968) are only a few samples from the treasures of erotic, forbidden poetry that he has left behind. These works’ explicit language and imagery are integrated in a more toned down language in “Howl”. “Publishing obscene odes” could be a way to characterise some of Ginsberg’s own work since he lays bare the body in an unashamedly explicit way in a large proportion of his work. His fascination with the naked body invites the reader to an orgasmic world of words and images. In “Love Poem on a Theme by Whitman”, inspired by a drawing of Robert LaVigne and reflecting on his imagined, ideal involvement with one of Neal Cassady’s weddings, he writes:

I’ll go into the bedroom silently and lie down between
the bridegroom and the bride,

those bodies fallen from heaven stretched out watching
naked and restless,
arms resting over their eyes in the darkness,
bury my face in their shoulders and breasts, breathing
their skin[...]
and the bride cry for forgiveness, and the groom be
covered with tears of passion and compassion,
and I rise from the bed replenished with last intimate
gestures and kisses of farewell –
all before the mind wakes, behind shades and closed
doors in a darkened house
where the inhabitants roam unsatisfied in the night,
nude ghosts seeking each other out in the silence.

(“Love Poem on a Theme by Whitman”, 1954)

Homoerotic imagery is also featured in “Howl” with images of men “who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear”, “who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons” who “sob behind a partition in a Turkish bath when the blond & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword”. Nakedness and nudity, exposing the private “waving genitals and manuscripts”, “scattering semen freely” men “who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer” provide unveiled images of the human body which proved to be extremely controversial at the time. Paul Breslin writes about Ginsberg’s approach to poetic nakedness in his book *The Psycho-Political Muse* that:

“madness” seems choosy about its victims, singling out the best minds to destroy; perhaps they go mad *because* they are the best minds. The three adjectives perched on the end of the line—“starving hysterical naked”—may at first seem mere overwriting. But they suggest that these elect “best minds” are “starving” not only for food, drugs, and sex, but for spiritual transcendence, for “the ancient heavenly connection to the starry

dynamo in the machinery of night” (AG, 126). Such yearning seems mystical only to a society that represses its own hunger for spiritual (as well as sexual) exploration. They are “naked” not only in their refusal to wear the clothes of social convention, or in preparation for lovemaking, but also in their vulnerability. In refusing all covering, they refuse protection also. The best minds have no Reichian character armor. And although “minds” stands metonymically for persons and emphasizes consciousness rather than the body, these “minds” are presented in predominantly bodily terms: one thinks of the body in connection with the words “naked” and “starving”, and even “hysterical” derives from the Greek word for “womb”. The hysterias that Freud decided to treat psychologically had previously been considered somatic ailments. The effect of Ginsberg's language is to sexualize the concept of “mind”, making it more bodily and instinctive, while simultaneously spiritualizing the body, making its hunger and nakedness into emblems of religious yearning.

(Breslin, 1987, p7)

Neal Cassady, Ginsberg's eternal muse, features in “Howl” as well as in other poems which are entirely dedicated to him, for example “Elegy for Neal Cassady” (1968) and the moving “On Neal's Ashes” (1968). “N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver” refers to the activities of a man who was such a

joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses' rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar road-side lonely petticoat upliftings & especially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys too.

(“Howl”, 1956)

These images remind us of the description featured in another poem of the same period mentioned above and called “Many Loves” (1956). In “Many Loves” there are vivid descriptions of Cassady’s body where “his belly of fists and starvation, his belly a thousand girls kissed in Colorado, his belly of rocks thrown over Denver roofs, prowess of jumping and fists, his stomach of solitudes, his belly of burning iron...”. Ginsberg’s intentional listing of sexual organs (and other body parts) provides a platform on which he can expose his disrespectful interest in the unspoken body part which he then turns into the written-spoken body part. Images of gas stations and gymnasiums (where the homosocial activity of sport supplies homoerotic imagery) come back in the love hymn “Many Loves” in a much more openly explicit sexual way:

[...] the smooth mount of his rock buttocks, silken in
power, rounded in animal fucking and bodily nights over
nurses and schoolgirls,
O ass of long solitudes in stolen cars, and solitudes on
curbs, musing fist in cheek,
Ass of a thousand farewells, ass of youth, youth’s lovers,
Ass of a thousand lonely craps in gas stations ass of great
painful secrecies of the years
O ass of mystery and night! Ass of gymnasiums and
muscular pants
ass of high school and masturbation ass of lone delight,
ass of mankind, so beautiful and hollow, dowry of Minds
and Angels, Ass of hero, Neal Cassady [...]
angel & greek & athlete & hero & brother and boy of my
dreams [...]

(“Many Loves”, 1956)

In “Howl”, the bodies are continually “bickering with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a

nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon” and are “confessing out the soul to conform the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head”.

Series of awakening shocks

The imagery of “Howl” is like a roller coaster with alternating hallucinations which seem to resemble drug-induced activities. His approach to awaking shock techniques involve descriptions of madness, emotional nakedness, sex, drugs and jazz and his depictions of madness decorated “with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares” can be related to the more poetic hallucinations of Rimbaud:

I have just swallowed a terrific mouthful of poison. –
Blessed, blessed, blessed the advice I was given!
– My guts are on fire. The power of the poison twists my
arms and legs, cripples me, drives me to the ground. I die
of thirst, I suffocate, I cannot cry. This is Hell, eternal
torment! See how the flames rise! I burn as I ought to.

(“A Season in Hell”, 1873)

However, Ginsberg’s list of “poisons” is more accurate: “the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong table, resting briefly in catatonia”. The emotional upheavals and the series of shocks were required to awaken the young American from the dullness of the ordinary life. Unfortunately, even today’s youth rely heavily on non-constructive activities, such as taking drugs, for their entertainment and this should reflect society’s lack of responsibility to provide exciting cultural provision for its youth.

Body-harming and self-mutilation of Ginsberg’s characters are described to have “burned cigarette holes in their arms” or “cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully” and

this could be a clear reference to Rimbaud's hero in "A Season in Hell" proving that Ginsberg was intrigued by the abject, non-beautiful nature of madness:

My ancestors were Norsemen: they slashed their own bodies, drank their own blood. I'll slash my body all over, I'll tattoo myself, I want to be as ugly as a Mongol; you'll see, I'll scream in the streets. I want to go really mad with anger. Don't show me jewels; I'll get down on all fours and writhe on the carpet. I want my wealth stained all over with blood. I will never do any work.

("A Season in Hell", 1873)

Realisation that a new limit of individual expression had been reached

Madness was a topic never too far removed from Allen's mind. He still received an occasional letter from his mother, who was lost in a world of paranoid fears. Two of Peter [Orlovsky]'s brothers, Nicholas and Julius, had been institutionalized in New York for mental disorders, and a third brother, Lafcadio, was reportedly having difficulties of his own. In April, Allen received word from Eugene that Carl Solomon, who has left his publishing job and was currently working as a Good Humor salesman in New York, had been hospitalized in Pilgrim State, the same hospital where Naomi [Ginsberg's mother] was a patient. The news was disturbing. "What'll happen to Carl in time", a concerned Ginsberg wondered.

(Schumacher,1992, p196)

By dedicating “Howl” to Carl Solomon, Ginsberg’s genuine concern about Solomon’s health is registered. The only way to fight madness and reach new limits of individual expression is by acceptance: accepting who you are and moving on. “Don’t hide the madness,” (Ginsberg, “On Burroughs’ Work”, 1954) he writes two years earlier for William Burroughs. And in “Howl”, his mother-like concern is expressed in the lines “ah Carl, while you are not safe, I am not safe”.

Ginsberg wanted to recreate the poetic form and in his own words “to recreate syntax” which was similar to Rimbaud’s wish to “invent new flowers, new planets, new flesh, new languages”. Rimbaud went a step further than that:

I invented colours of the vowels! A black, E
White, I red, O blue, U green. I made rules for the
form and movement of every consonant, and I
boasted of inventing, with rhythms from within
me, a kind of poetry that all the senses, sooner or
later, would recognize. And I alone would be its
translator.

(“A Season in Hell”, 1873)

Ginsberg even felt the need to make sure that he can control time itself by writing about his friends “who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade”. Even if the ending hides some element of sarcasm, the sign of success is present. They tried to stop time, to ignore the fact that *Τα πάντα ρει* [everything flows], but failed. At least, they have experienced what it means to be original, individual and unique.

Epilogue

It is the belief in the art of poetry that has gone hand in hand with this man into his Golgotha, from

that charnel house, similar in every way, to that of the Jews in the past war. But this is in our country, our own fondest purlieus. We are blind and live our blind lives out in blindness. Poets are damned but they are not blind, they see with the eyes of the angels. This poet sees through and all around the horrors he partakes of in the very intimate details of his poem. He avoids nothing but experiences it to the hilt. He contains it. Claims it as his own - and, we believe, laughs at it and has the time and effrontery to love a fellow of his choice and record that love in a well-made poem.

Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell.

(Williams in Ginsberg, 1956, Introduction)

The work of Allen Ginsberg speaks to all the senses. “Howl” is a manifesto, a confession, a journey to an angry American man’s world and back. Rimbaud’s art was silenced after his “A Season in Hell”: “I have to bury my imagination and my memories! What an end to a splendid career as an artist and storyteller!” Ginsberg was determined to have the lustful body present throughout his work with strong and powerful images of illicit erotic desire.

In part, because of that, the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956 would not pass without controversy. Within a year the volume faced the scrutiny of the courts. After an intense, and landmark, court battle during 1957 in which outstanding literary personalities defended “Howl” as a significant comment on human experience, Judge Clayton W. Horn declared the work to be not obscene. In his decision he wrote: “Life is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same or conforms to a particular pattern. No two persons think alike. We are all made from the same mould, but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press of

speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism? An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words” (Feldman & Gartenberg, 1958, p164). And that is exactly what Ginsberg did. He continued to write about the human body until his final days with the optimism and disrespect of his youth:

At 66 just learning how to take care of my body
Wake cheerful 8 A.M. & write in a notebook
rising from bed side naked leaving a naked boy
asleep by the wall...
put on white shirt white pants white sox...
happy not yet to be a corpse.

(“Autumn Leaves”, 1992)

Remaining ever youthful in spirit, he used his art to document on paper, like Cavafy, the memories of his tempestuous life. And even if the tone becomes more serious closer to his end,

Rainy night on Union Square, full moon. Want
more poems? Wait till I’m dead.

(“12AM Answering Mail”, 1990)

his ability to shock/move remains unchanged,

I can still see Neal’s 23 year old corpse when I
come in my hand.

(“Approaching Seoul by Bus in Heavy Rain”, 1992)

The “naked body”, Ginsberg’s own body and the body of his work, will haunt the readers “with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years” (“Howl”, 1956).

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