

“MAD COMRADES SINGING”:

Dramatizations of Madness in Sylvia Plath and
Allen Ginsberg

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Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath are iconic figures of the mid-twentieth century, each with a coterie of devoted readers who take the poems very much to heart. What Ginsberg says of his own work is true for Plath’s poems as well: readers “see things in me that are like things in them.” But as Plath insists, there is more to the poems, and to the writing of them, than just exposing one’s feelings: “I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is . . . [O]ne should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind.” Zoe Doucette takes on the task of showing how these two stylistically diverse poets make great art out of personal suffering.

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When the speaker of Allen Ginsberg’s seminal poem *Howl* cries out to the “Minds! New loves! Mad generation! Down on the rocks of time!” (23), he articulates the dominant motif and addressees of the work; *Howl* dramatizes the intensely personal world of the mad and the

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state of madness as a generational, communal condition of post-war America. Ginsberg was not alone in his poetic dramatization of personal experience with mental illness and psychiatric care in the 1950s. Poet Sylvia Plath also drew on her internal struggles and psychiatric treatment as a source for poetic imagery, as well as to dramatize a struggle for coherent, meaningful subjectivity in a world that allows atrocity. Ginsberg and Plath each dramatize their experiences of madness as confessional poets, but their techniques and ends differ. Ginsberg, the eccentric Beat icon, dramatizes his experiences in a bid to make the obscene spiritual and to inspire the identification and unification of a generation undergoing upheaval. Plath, the deceptively demure East-coast academic, dramatizes depression and suicide with a far more personal focus, writing of madness as the struggle to collect and claim a unified subjectivity in a hostile, irrational, and even fascistic environment.

For Allen Ginsberg, mental illness was a constant presence in his life from early childhood. His mother, Naomi, a paranoid schizophrenic, drifted in and out of institutional care throughout his early years, and his exposures to her episodes of instability - including witnessing a suicide attempt at age eleven - created a

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trauma that echoes through his poetic works (Raskin 29-30). During his time at Columbia University, Ginsberg made influential social, romantic, and artistic connections with Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Lucien Carr, each of whom had been through psychiatric care (52). Ginsberg himself claimed to have experienced an auditory hallucination of William Blake’s voice reading the poem “Ah! Sun-flower” in 1948, and reported suicidal ideation and instability to friends (78, 83). Ginsberg’s personal brush with psychiatric interment came soon after. Growing paranoid that his writings involving homosexuality would be discovered by the authorities, Ginsberg elected to hide the work in his brother’s home. Ginsberg and his unlicensed, paroled driver “set off with his papers in a stolen sedan packed with stolen goods,” only to drive “the wrong way on a one-way street in Queens,” and to get caught by the authorities (88). After the discovery of his papers and stolen property, Ginsberg elected to spend time in the New York State Psychiatric Institute rather than face prison. At the institute, Ginsberg met fellow writer Carl Solomon, who exposed him to French literature, culture, and existentialist philosophy (92). Ginsberg dramatizes these experiences, and Solomon himself, as bombastic, dark images and bright, insane characters in his poetic

opus, *Howl*.

Although the mad characters in *Howl* have been damaged by the immensity and violence of a mad culture, Ginsberg also sees madness as a solution for living out of the ashes of war. Section III, “Rockland,” is addressed to Carl Solomon, the madman whom Ginsberg takes beyond the specific, into an archetype of lost potential. Solomon is not only himself, but also “imitate[s] the shade” of Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi (Ginsberg 24). He takes up Solomon’s madman face as a mask, behind which Ginsberg has all the tools and images of the madhouse.

Madness is dramatized to specific political ends in *Howl*. For Ginsberg, Jonah Raskin writes in *American Scream*, madness indicates a romantic purity of spirit, “a badge of honour in a world gone insane with bombs and dictators, terror and tyranny” (81). Ginsberg uses madness to criticize tyrannical cultural authority; it is not Solomon who accuses “doctors of insanity,” but Ginsberg (Ginsberg 25). Madness, in this romantic sense, is an experience of private truth to be shared with other truth-seekers as a means of social change. Ginsberg recognizes affirmation of self and private truth as an effect of his work. He states in an interview,

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Readers identify because they see me as more or less naked and transparent. They see things in me that are like things in them. It's not a breakdown of identity. It's absolutely an affirmation of identity, or an empowerment of individual identities. Someone says “oh, yeah, I get a hard-on, too,” or “I saw that, too,” or “My mother is crazy too,” or “I'm neurotic too,” or “I'm a coward too.” (Meyers 22)

By dramatizing taboo and private experience in his writing, Ginsberg turns madness and total collapse into affirmation and connection, experienced *together*. “I'm with you in Rockland,” he repeats over and over; “I'm with you in Rockland / where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter” (Ginsberg 24). The result of Ginsberg's insistent repetition is to emphasize togetherness through dark, hidden aspects of human life. “I'm with you,” he says.

Sylvia Plath's personal experiences with mental illness are well known and well documented. She has become the embodiment of the mad poet - the tragic, beautiful, and suicidal genius. There is the domineering spectre of her dead father; there are the volumes of journals, the precocious teenage diaries, already aware of the potential dangers of the cutting, efficient mind that penned them; there is her first major depressive episode and suicide attempt between her sophomore and junior years of

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college, later mythologized in *The Bell Jar*; and there are the rounds of electroshock therapy she faced, as well as her stay in a prestigious psychiatric hospital (Butscher 109-22). Even at the pinnacle of her poetic career, there is her struggle in a tempestuous marriage – culminating in 1963 with her morbidly domestic suicide. Plath’s tragic, mad-poet image may have been partly constructed after her death, but, in life, she used her experiences to craft both her poetry and a personal mythology.

For Plath, like Ginsberg, dramatizing madness allows for an affirmation of selfhood. Her technique, however, is slightly different. Plath does not romanticize madness. In her view, madness transforms persons into victims, disrupting subjectivity. Her poetry is an attempt to order her downtrodden, disintegrated life. In “Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration,” M. D. Uroff suggests that Plath “controlled her own terrifying experiences in her poetry” by creating speakers and characters who “demonstrate the way in which the embattled mind operates . . . Through them, Plath shows how terror may grip the mind and render it rigid” (106). Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” poems, which dramatize her psychiatric treatment and mental strife, are also poems concerned with crafting and asserting a unified

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selfhood from fascistic, externally controlled worlds. Each victimized, disenfranchised speaker resists the power of shadowy, authoritarian figures to put forth an independent, however broken, personhood. In “Daddy,” Plath’s clearly autobiographical speaker revolts against the domineering male authority figure whose memory has haunted her and constrained her selfhood. The Nazi-costumed Otto Plath figure is a dramatized embodiment of Plath’s own madness, an uncontrollable, dominating force.² Under his rule, Plath’s speaker becomes as dehumanized and identity-deprived as “a Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen” (Plath 33). Growing tired of her limitations, she laments, “You do not do, you do not do / Anymore, black shoe / In which I have lived” (1-3). Plath calls upon her 1953 suicide attempt as an escape from the pressures of self-definition and a return to the domination of exterior authority: “At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you” (58-59). The being who returns from a reunion with madness is completely in pieces, “stuck together with glue” (62). “Lady Lazarus” not only

²Plath’s use of Holocaust and Nazi imagery is a serious issue in her work that needs to be acknowledged, especially when reading such allusions as symbolic, which I do here with some guilt. The topic has been dealt with very well by many articles (such as Al Strangeway’s “The Boot in the Face”), and requires a passing nod.

dramatizes Plath's mental illness, but presents mental illness as a drama, complete with peanut-eating spectators. To survive suicide is a "theatrical / Comeback" (53-54). The drama of the speaker's illness objectifies her, making her an unreal subject; she compares her victimization to the butchered bodies of concentration camp prisoners. In the final stanza, the pieced-together "Lady Lazarus" takes control, threatening the authority of Herr God and Herr Doctor. For Plath's speaker, suicide is dramatized as a grab for power. Returning from the dead grants mystical knowledge: it is like a magic trick. The speaker's ability to rise from the dead is remarkable: it gives her power, rather than taking it away. "Beware, beware," the speaker croons, "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / and I eat men like air" (82-86).

Both Plath and Ginsberg are able to restore a power and humanity to their speakers through their dramatizations of mental illness and psychiatric care. They weave together personal tragedy and the historical, large-scale tragedies of the twentieth century, echoing the continental voices of Dadaists and Surrealists. The modern world is declared irrational, and madness becomes both a personal and historical condition of upheaval that demands address. For Plath and Ginsberg, poetry provides a venue

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for articulating and containing experiences that are incomprehensibly painful. Ginsberg grew up with the instability of a schizophrenic mother, but he also saw his poet father transform the experience into art. He “watched Louis as he sat at his desk writing poetry,” Raskin writes. “[He] marvelled at his father’s ability to make order out of chaos and metaphor out of madness. The world was a horrible place and suffering was everywhere, Louis insisted, but there was always the ecstasy of poetry” (36). Although Ginsberg incorporates the disjuncture and streaming stimulus of madness into his free verse poetry, his work ultimately attempts to give rationality to an irrational life. Plath, too, uses poetry to give structure and rationality to madness. “Plath’s character[s] employ all [their] energies in maintaining a ritualistic defense against [their] situation[s],” Uroff asserts (106). Plath herself believed that “one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured . . . with an informed and intelligent mind” (Plath qtd. in Uroff 105). For Plath and Ginsberg, writing of the confinement of madness is a bid to break through irrationality and into a truly modern, meaningful human existence.

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