

Naked Self Down on Paper:

Celebration and Criticism in Ginsberg's *Howl*

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How does Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* become the anthem of a generation? Sam Krueger explores how the poem connects the state of the society and the state of the person, how it exposes the poem's speaker and author, naked, before the great forces of industry, war, government, and social order, in an act of self-liberation. Ginsberg's queer self, ecstatic, perverse, becomes a model of reformed citizenship. The enthusiasm, good humour, and bravery of the poet keep the poem alive today.

—Dr. Bruce Greenfield

Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, in its intensely personal style, may be considered as a kind of confessional poetry. Far from being individualized confessional poetry, however, like that of Robert Lowell, Ginsberg's poetics in *Howl* funnel the sentiment and spirit of the disillusioned post-war American generation into the mind of a single speaker, rather than channeling personal experience into a wider consideration of the world at large. Nonetheless, the lived experience of the poet and his bearing witness to "the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" provide a subjective basis that confronts the reader with the frankness, energy, and clarity that characterize *Howl* (Ginsberg 1356). I was initially prompted, by the editors in the Norton anthology where I have accessed this text, to examine this poem as embodying a tension held in "[combining] apocalyptic criticism ... with exuberant celebration" (Norton 1354). This provides the basis for a discussion of what I interpret as a convolutedly optimistic poem. The criticism of post-

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war America, its propaganda and industry, and its terrifying treatment of issues related to mental health are altogether clear in this poem—but so is the uncompromising “exuberant celebration” of the American (male) queer identity. In this discussion, I will examine how elements of celebration and criticism are simultaneously presented in Ginsberg’s poem, and how their tension elucidates a wide-eyed, crazily-grinning optimism that cannot be ignored.

A pervading optimism may be found in *Howl* because part of its goal is the overall project of knowing oneself *for* oneself; it is, in this case, from the self that springs the poet’s well of poetic celebration. Ginsberg, in his own words, “was compelled ‘to put naked self down on paper’” (Raskin 109). This can be seen throughout the poem in literal descriptions of nakedness, but the project must extend further to the confessional laying-bare of the poet’s soul. The vivid imagery and descriptions of the queer male, of his actions and desires, are part of Ginsberg’s poetic project of celebrating a sense of his own, and his contemporaries’, queer identities. In an illuminating passage from Jonah Raskin’s book *American Scream*, he provides a biographical backdrop—partially drawn from Ginsberg’s own journals—to provide context for the writing process that led to *Howl*:

What he wanted most of all was to ‘tip my mitt,’ as he called it—to give himself away before he could suppress himself. Only then would he know himself deep down inside, he believed. For the first time since high school, he began to reconsider *Leaves of Grass*. He

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noted that Whitman 'had put himself out in his book (as he never was able to do in the flesh),' and he began to think, albeit tentatively, of improving on Whitman by putting himself out as a 'queer' in print and in the flesh. (109-10)

Whitman's influence on Ginsberg's writing has often been discussed, especially in consideration of "A Supermarket in California," but it is interesting to think of his legacy as affecting how the younger poet might have engaged with his identity through his own written work. In *Howl*, Ginsberg most certainly puts himself out as queer; the confessional, personal nature of the text would in its consideration by the American public (and the American justice system) forever connect his published work with his actual homosexual identity. This is, most likely, because lines insinuating that the speaker is among the kind of men "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, / and scream with joy" do not go blithely unnoticed (Ginsberg 1358). Through *Howl*, Ginsberg clearly openly rejoices in the outward expression of the male queer identity, while simultaneously acknowledging the internal tension inherent in wrestling with that very identity. Yet what must follow is that the text, considered as a site of queer celebration, is also implicated in his consideration of the generational mental illness that he claims witness to. In *Howl*, he brings this scrutiny to bear on his identity, his writing, and his own burdened mind.

Ginsberg demonstrates this close scrutiny near the end of the first section of the poem, where the nakedness of the soul and the shame that can come with it are made

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clear. The poet, here perhaps more than any other place in the poem, puts “naked self down on paper”:

to recreate the syntax and measure of the poor human
prose and stand before / you speechless and intelligent
and shaking with shame, rejected yet / *confessing out the*
soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his / naked
and endless head. (1361, emphasis added)

Here, the nakedness of the soul coincides with the nakedness of the body, and Ginsberg’s speaker stands before a figure, a “you,” in the presence of whom he quails. It is God? A parent? A lover? His own self? In introducing the speaker’s shame, Ginsberg forces the reader to confront such questions for him- or herself. Whoever the figure, this passage makes several things clear. For one, Ginsberg acknowledges the attainment of a confession he had hoped for in writing a poem that could augment the kind of identity revelation that he saw Whitman achieve. Yet perhaps more importantly, the text embodies the sheer tension that accompanies the baring of one’s soul—in that it is not only laid open for others to see, but fully revealed to barer/bearer as well. The lines here present this tension as a cohort of contradictions: the speaker is both speechless—dumb—and intelligent; already-rejected yet, for the reason of self-revelation, continuing to confess. Continuing to confess, indeed. Through the medium of poem he is not in fact “speechless,” and through attempting “to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose ... to conform to the rhythm of thought in his/naked and endless head” Ginsberg offers a precious

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morsel of contextual sense-making: given the prosaic, free-verse form the poem takes, the reader infers that *Howl* is a direct recreation of *his* mind's syntax. He is, truly, howling out the knotted contents of his mind and soul.

The shameful rejection Ginsberg professes through the above passage embodies more than just the tension he may feel in grappling with his own queer identity. A buzzing line of morbid anticipation may be traced through the poem, coming under what the Norton editors call "apocalyptic criticism." If the figure that Ginsberg's speaker stands before is, perhaps, God, then the rejection that he meets may, in a traditional Christian consideration, land him in Hell. Ginsberg is Jewish, and yet he confesses like a Catholic, because he must, at least, "[put] down here what might be left to say in time come after death" (1361). Perhaps this is because there wouldn't be any opportunity to say it, so at least it's written down somewhere. Perhaps, if I may be glib, having a written copy might prompt his memory when the final bell tolls. Either way, Ginsberg is critical of conceptions of religious life-after-death while simultaneously implicating himself in them—all while conveying a fearful criticism of a world where his own country has made nuclear destruction and death on a massive scale all too possible.

This particular fear is clear in Section II of *Howl*, where Ginsberg's mental syntax leaps to the level of staccato punctuation, and his "apocalyptic criticism" whips along to the forefront of the text. In what I interpret as America sacrificing its children to the fires of modernity, Ginsberg screams, "Moloch! Moloch! robot apartments!

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invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! / blind capitals!
demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible /
madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!" (1362). I suggest that it is in this section that both celebration and criticism may be found tortuously co-habiting the lines. Each exclamation is joyously called out like a peddler hawking her wares in bright market sunlight, though here they are America's offerings to her people, a transaction that requires the sacrifice of children; the sunlight is the perpetual threat of a bright nuclear flash. America is presented as reveling in its invisible suburbs and demonic industries. And yet, before we get to "monstrous bombs!" we read "granite cocks!" The celebration of the statuesque male form and male homosexual desire pervades even here, where every polluting by-product has "gone down the / American river!" (1362). Perhaps Ginsberg suggests that homosexuality is an integral part of American life and culture and that it, along with the rest of the country, will be destroyed in a potential nuclear apocalypse. Perhaps he sees queerness as a part of the madness that has destroyed the best minds of his generation. The ambiguity here is palpable, and the significance of the above lines is that they are a demonstration of how the syntax of Ginsberg's poetry—and, by extent, of his troubled working mind—allows for the simultaneous coexistence of joyous celebration and stark criticism, and the maddening tension that characterizes their friction.

Jonah Raskin provides helpful commentary as to why, and how; Ginsberg may have been able to write with

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a certain gleeful bluntness about the “monstrous” subjects discussed above. Raskin writes,

San Francisco in the 1950s liberated [Ginsberg] so that he could write about New York in the 1940s – the city that he loved and that he had lost. The opening of his mind enabled him to look back and write with a certain ironic and comic detachment about minds destroyed by madness, including his own (122).

This “opening of his mind” I have presented in this paper as including the opening of the poet’s soul, the laying-bare of the self to the self’s own critical scrutiny. In *Howl*, Ginsberg is most certainly critical of himself, and of his generation, his country and its practices – but he also finds tenable reasons for celebration, mostly expressed in forthright descriptions of homoerotic desire and love. The irony and comic nature of his poetic voice, addressed above by Raskin, lend a tone to this poem that I cannot help but interpret as optimistic. The underlying optimistic perspective is aided by reading the “Footnote to *Howl*,” in which Ginsberg employs the same abundance of exclamations that he does with “*Moloch*.” The repeated assurance that “Everything is holy!”, while tempting to take as sarcastic, cannot in the face of true celebration be read as anything other than earnest (1363). The validation, once again, of the queer male body and the male figures integral to Ginsberg’s life may flout what is considered doctrinally “holy,” but here (and thus retrospectively, at other times in *Howl*) he suggests a sectarian consideration of the religious lexicon, rather than solely its traditional usage. Ultimately, the poem, through its myriad tensions,

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must be considered as optimistic—because life itself, Ginsberg insists, is holy. To howl is only to affirm this fact.

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