

Madness and modernism: Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" – Fifty years later

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Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl* in 1954 and 1955 and first read it publicly at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955. When I first read the poem "Howl" a few years after its publication in 1956, I found it shocking in many ways. Even the six asterisks representing the word "fucked" shocked me. Even more shocking were the many different sexual activities mentioned in the poem. At that time I did not even know what many of the slang words for sexual acts or drugs meant! It seemed quite alien to the "Grey Flannel Suited," Cleaver family 1950's in which I grew up. In the fifty years since Ginsberg wrote it, "Howl" has not changed; not even the asterisks were have been replaced with the then-unprintable word. What has changed is that so many of the corruptions that were only latent or subterranean at the time Ginsberg wrote "Howl" have become "all to concise and too clear" in the last fifty years. Ginsberg told us about not only what we were as a nation and culture but about what we were going to become. In Part II of the poem, he raged against what he called "Moloch," which was modeled not only on the old testament God to whom children were sacrificed but also on Fritz Lang's 1926 silent film *Metropolis* (about which I published a note in 2002 in *Notes on Contemporary Literature*). What Ginsberg called "Moloch" in the mid-1950's came to be called "The Military Industrial" or "The Military Industrial Academic Complex" in the 1970's.

A poem that was shocking in the 1950's and early 1960's and then a powerful statement of what frustrated many of us in the 1960's and 1970's now seems to read like a sociological and psychological history of the last fifty years in America.

Some literary works have managed to replicate all that E. M. W. Tillyard calls a "world view" of their eras: society's values, familial hierarchy and relationships, political structures, individual's sense of self, cosmology, and theology. The *Canterbury Tales* captures the late middle ages, *Paradise Lost* the late renaissance, the poetry of Pope 18th century neo-classicism, *The Prelude* the romantic era, and, I believe, Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, the late Victorian age. Then, all of the fragmentation, self-doubt, lack of faith and its attendant values, and the general sense of despair that follows World War I was captured in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, poems that imply that things could not possible get any worse. But, by the middle of the 20th century, sure

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enough, things have gotten worse. And I believe that Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" describes just how much worse things have become. "Howl" is a poem that simultaneously describes mental illness – schizophrenia – at the same time that it paints a very troubling but accurate picture of life in America in the latter half of the 20th Century.

I will be relying on the theories of two scholars, Sylvano Arieti, a psychiatry professor whose *Interpretations of Schizophrenia*¹ was the standard medical school textbook on the subject for a large part of the latter half of the century, and Louis A. Sass, a psychologist and literary theorist, whose book is *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*.²

Sass's well-documented book shows that there are seven characteristics that modernist art shares with schizophrenia. First is "negativism and anti-traditionalism", which include "its defiance of authority and convention, its antagonism or indifference to the expectations of its audience, and on occasion, its rage for chaos" (29). A second, and "related characteristic of any modernist and postmodernist works is the uncertainty or multiplicity of their point of view" (30). Third is "a certain fragmentation and passivization," which includes "a loss of the self's sense of unity and of its capacity for effective of voluntary action." According to Sass, this loss of self is the polar opposite of "the romantic cult of self" (31). Fourth is the "'loss of significant external reality'³ with the emphasis either on the loss of the feeling that reality is external or on the loss of reality's aura of significance." That is, "the world seems to be *derealized*" (32). Fifth is a change in the sense of "spatial form," in that "certain traditional ways of organizing literary works become less viable." There may be a loss of "narrative structure" or logical development within a work, either of which would suggest the possibility of "meaningful historical change... as a central unifying principle" (34). Sixth, "mimesis of external reality, evocation of a spiritual beyond" and any "ethical or intellectual message" all seem to have lost their "ability to compel commitment or belief" (34). Seventh is "a particularly profound and pervasive form of irony" (35-36).

Since I have organized my argument on the basis of specific symptoms of schizophrenia specified by Sylvano Arieti and do not want to repeat my evidence in order to demonstrate these seven characteristics shared by modernism and schizophrenia, I will simply point out how the specific symptoms I focus on support Sass's seven assertions.

Ginsberg's "Howl" claims that modern society has driven the most promising men of his generation mad. In Part One Ginsberg's opening sentence is "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...." He then continues to claim that the society in which they live has made these "best minds" both "crazy" (9) and "suicidal" (13). They are "hallucinating" (9) and suffering from "nightmares" (9) and "catatonia" (15). The best minds "broke down" (10), "were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts" (12). The best minds themselves recognize that they are psychotic, because they "demanded sanity traits" (15) and they "presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse... demanding instant lobotomy" (15). Ginsberg calls one of the best minds a "madman" (15).

These "best minds" were given the same treatments that were being given to schizophrenics at the time. They were given "the concrete void of insulin metrasol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong and amnesia" (15). They returned "to the visible madman doom of the wards of the madtowns of the East Pilgrim State's Rockland and Greystone's foetid halls" (15).

All of Part III is focused on the fact that "the best minds of my generation," who have been driven mad by their society, are now incarcerated in the mental hospital Rockland. In Rockland, these men demonstrate their madness in a variety of ways. They believe they have "murdered... twelve secretaries" (19). They "laugh at... invisible humor" (19). The "faculties of the[ir] skull[s] no longer admit the worms of the senses." The best minds "scream in a straightjacket that [they are] losing the game of actual

¹ *Interpretations of Schizophrenia*, New York: Basic Books, 1974.

² *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1992.

³ E. Heller, *The Disinherited Mind*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, p. 172.

pingpong of the abyss” and “bang on the catatonic piano” (19). Their minds are so fully destroyed that Ginsberg tells them that “fifty more shocks will never return your soul to your body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void.” They “accuse [their] doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha” (20). For Ginsberg, the only consolation about the condition of these destroyed men is to fantasize that they finally all break out of their institutional and mental prisons. He imagines that they all “wake up electrified out of the coma by [their] own souls’ airplanes roaring over the roof they’ve come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse,” and he imagines them shouting “O skinny legions run outside O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we’re free (20).

Surely these sufferings parallel the huge increase in the number of contemporary Americans who suffer from various kinds of mental disorders and need the whole pharmacy of psychotropic drugs.

The “best minds” and the speaker in the poem exhibit paranoia, another symptom of schizophrenia. They also demonstrate a recurrent fear of many contemporary Americans, who feel that someone – the government, the liberals, their employers, or *someone* – is trying to cheat or destroy them. The “best minds” of Ginsberg’s poem “accus the radio of hypnotism” (15) and believe they are being “investigat[ed] by the F. B. I.” (11). They believe that they have been given “mustard gas” by “sinister intelligent editors” (14). Likewise in the last fifty years we (conservatives and liberals alike) have become more and more suspicious of what the power-brokers in our nation are doing and we seem more and more fearful of corruption in business, which might seem paranoid if we had not seen so much evidence of corruption, like that of Enron.

Another major symptom of schizophrenia is intense psychological pain, which leads patients to seek ways to numb or at least distract themselves from their pain. In order to ease their pain, Ginsberg’s “best minds” rely on all kinds of drugs and alcohol: “an angry fix” (9), “maryjuana” (9), “paint” (9) “alcohol” (9), “Peyote” (10), “wine” (10), “tea[]” (10), “stale beer” (10), “junk” (10), “cigarettes” (11), “narcotic[s]” (11) “Tokay” (13), “opium” (13), and “whiskey” (14). Some “retired to Mexico to cultivate a habit” (15). They also try all varieties of sexual activities to alleviate their pain. Surely the last fifty years has been a time in which people have become dependant on drugs or alcohol to alleviate their psychological sufferings.

Just as schizophrenics revert to more primitive language, less logical language, and language controlled more by its sound than its meaning, so does the speaker in Ginsberg’s poem. The speaker says that the “best minds” were “passing out incomprehensible leaflets” (11). What they thought were lofty incantations were in fact only “stanzas of gibberish” (13). Sometimes their talk is merely “ashcan rantings” (10). What they speak is merely “yacketayakking screaming vomiting” (10).

Many of the speaker’s own statements make little cognitive sense, although they may have powerful imagistic and symbolic implications. Some examples are the following: “ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind” (10), “the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox” (10), “secret gas-station solipsisms of johns” (13), “nitroglycerine shrieks” (12), “drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality” (12), “hotrod-Golgotha Jail-solitude watch” (12), and “midnight solititude-beach dolmen-realms of love” (15).

Sometimes the speaker’s utterances are organized more by sound than by sense. The poem includes frequent examples of alliteration and repetition. Some examples are “from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine” and “battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear light of Zoo” (10), “who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver, watched over Denver and brooded and loned in Denver..., and now Denver is lonesome for her heroes” (14), who wandered around... wondering where to go, and went” (10), traveled in “boxcars, boxcars, boxcars” (11), and “the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed” (11). Similarly, influential writers like Jack Kerouac, Sylvia Plath, Bob Dylan, and rap musicians have led many of us to use language for the emotional impact of its sound instead of concentrating on more traditional grammar and logic.

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