

Modernity, Myth, and Innovative Poetic Form in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

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During the mid-20th century, where free-form jazz and the hovering spectre of nuclear annihilation swirled in the post-war American landscape, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" cried out in defiance to the conformity of American consumerist society and the traditional poetic forms found in academia's movement towards New Criticism. In "Howl," Ginsberg lays out an eye-witness testimony of the desperate lives of the Beat generation in their struggle to attain spiritual enlightenment in the rancorous environment of post-war America, which Ginsberg lambasts as materialistic, unfulfilling, rigid, and even gluttonous, with the mythic figure of Moloch representing the irrational sacrifice and exploitation of workers and artists to the mechanisms of state power and capital. Following a 'tradition' of innovative poetics from Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson, Ginsberg formulates his generation's malaise of the destructive tendencies of modernity through a relentless torrent of gritty visuals and sensations which document the "the greatest minds of [his] generation destroyed by madness," with this particular content and form finding resonance in Olson's conception of poetry in "Projective Verse." In "Howl," Ginsberg breaks away from traditional poetic forms by projecting a literal howl from his breath (Olson) rather than following standard meter and rhyme, while also unleashing a flood of sensations and perceptions of the anguished lives of

the Beats in resistance to the hegemony of the state, capital, and academia. This political dimension in Ginsberg's rejection of conformity and the violent forces of modernity finds not only resonance in this innovative use of projective verse in "Howl," but also how his deployment of myth stands in opposition to that other landmark poem of the 20th century, T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." By way of a reversal of the regeneration myth through the figure of Moloch, Ginsberg illustrates how the established order of modernity and capitalism reproduces itself through the sacrifice of the youthful, creative, and innovative, rather than the 'aging,' established order itself.

What Ginsberg's "Howl" shares with much of the early Modernist poets, such as Pound, Williams, and even Eliot, is capturing the both beautifully transient and brutal environment of modernity, and then forcefully relaying this experience to the reader through the 'kinetic' sensations of the poem's 'content.' This conception of innovative 20th century poetry is best expounded upon by Olson in his theses that the form of projective verse contains "one perception [which] must immediately and directly lead to a further perception," and that each perception "move, instantaneously, on another!" (Olson). But these perceptions, or sometimes "objects" in the field of the poem's composition, is also rooted in the sound of syllables and how the fully formed line

follows from the poet's "breath," which according to Olson, link together the "heart" and "mind" of the poet. This combination of illustrative and perceptual "objects" within the poem and the phonetic effect which they produce follows Olson's formation of "kinetics" to describe this aesthetic movement of perceptions leading "instanter" to further perceptions. This is realized in early Modern poets such as in Williams's "For Elsie," with the line "the pure products of America / go crazy—," utilizing alliteration to punctuate and link together multiple perceptions which converge to illustrate the 'craziness' and fractured meaning of American consumerism, and how this leads to a sterile, often violent and sexist environment for the American working-class.

In Ginsberg's context of the mid-20th century, this dynamism of poetic perceptions and their phonetic qualities are employed in "Howl" to illustrate the destructive nature of the consumer revolution and the American modern environment towards individuals who resist conformity and materialism through sex, drugs, and the search of spiritual enlightenment. This "kinetics" or relentless energy of perceptions is expressed by Ginsberg's eye-witness account of the Beats who are "starving hysterical naked," with each word its own perception leading to the next, illustrating not only the physical depravity of the Beats, but also their shattered psychological condition, which is as fragmented and distorted as their modern environment. These visceral perceptions are also emboldened by the energy released in the stressed assonance of each syllable, "starv-ing / hyst-er-i-cal / nak-ed," which compliments Olson's linking of the heart and the mind to realize the full force of kinetic language, as well as highlighting the fractured and distorted sense of reality experienced by the Beats. This connection of the heart and mind also seems to mirror a major theme throughout "Howl" of the

Beats experiencing the gritty, brutal, and ethereal sensations of the modern world in order to achieve some sort of spiritual enlightenment, which Ginsberg portrays as both noble self-expression and futile self-destruction. This dichotomy is most poignant in how the Beats "purgatoried their torsos night after night," twisting the noun purgatory into a verb in order to highlight the spiritual and ascetic dimension of the Beats cleansing themselves both physically and spiritually "with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls." This torrent of perceptions bridges the sensations of the body to the ethereal nature of the mind, punctuating the Beats' desire to achieve a higher plane of enlightenment in the gritty American landscape.

In their raw experience of reality, the Beats are seen "burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night," juxtaposing the religious desire for heavenly connection to the seemingly soulless and nihilistic reality of rampant industry and machinery. Like the disillusioned Beats themselves, they find their urban environment to be "incomparable" and "blind," with the "shuttering cloud" of the city's streets reflecting their distorted outer and inner sense of subjectivity, as the "lightening in [their] mind leap[ed] toward poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the motionless world of Time between." What this line illustrates is the profusion of the senses and transcendental reflection, where the drug-influenced hallucinatory faculty of the Beats attempt to apprehend the "lightening" of the world around them as well as the "lightning" of their own cognitive thoughts in between, with the inclusion of "Canada & Paterson" referencing Jack Kerouac's origins in Canada and Ginsberg's own origins in Paterson, New Jersey. This apprehension of "lightening," representing the transient, contingent, and instantaneous nature

of both the mind and reality, uncannily reflects Olson's conception of how the projective poem itself should "in syntax, the sentence as first act of nature, [become] as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object, quick." Ginsberg's quick and abrasive perceptions of the Beats' state of mind and their experience of reality, such as in the emphasis on Time, space, objects, and origins, seem to show how ambitious yet hopeless the Beats are in their desperate attempt to understand the distorting and confused world around them, which is also mirrored in their own subjectivity.

This jarring and instantaneous content of Ginsberg's "Howl," with its juxtaposition between the materialist sensations of modern life to the Beat's spiritual journey to ascension, extends itself to the very form of the poem, the structure of which releases the content's visceral and kinetic energy. The form itself is a literal howl from Ginsberg's breath, projecting the despair, defeat, humiliation, and hopelessness of the Beats who struggle to live and express themselves in an isolating and mechanistic society, which disciplines and punishes those who resist the conformity of American consumerism and state power. This deliberate style of form to be an extension of the content of the poem harkens to Olson's essay on "Projective Verse," where he outlines how the kinetic movement of the poet's voice from various objects and perceptions draws from the poet's "breath," which "allows all the speech-force of language." Olson then curiously emphasizes the practicality of the typewriter to indicate the pause between the breaths, and the fully formed perceptions of the lines during each breath: If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time... If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line... he means that time to pass that it takes the eye—that hair of time suspended—to pick up the next line.

This is fully realized in "Howl" by how Ginsberg utilizes space and indentations of the page to indicate to the reader how their breath should be utilized to communicate the full "speech-force of language." Because these indentations go on for several lines, leaping from one visceral perception to another, and utilizing the sounds of syllables to their full force, the overall effect of the poem is one of a howl—a cry against the rigid obstacles, soulless institutions, and crushed dreams of modernity. Each breath becomes packed with a flurry of assonances and images which completely barrel through any syntactic conventions of language, such as in the line "yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars." In lines such as these (and so much more), the perceptions of the Beats which Ginsberg relays to the reader is intensified by this very form that communicates instantaneous perceptions within a single breath. This use of breath to further illustrate the hectic, drug-fueled, and despairing lives of the Beats demonstrate how their lives are intimately intertwined with the dominating forces of state power, social conformity, and capital. Many of the Beats, including Ginsberg himself, have been incarcerated, drafted, and institutionalized for the sake of the continuation of the homogenous body-politic, and Ginsberg's use of breath in "Howl" not only breaks the conventions of language and traditional poetic form, but the ideological, political, and hegemonizing contours of post-war America.

In the second section of "Howl," Ginsberg's innovative employment of form and breath is directed at the figure of "Moloch," the embodiment of capital, mass-industry, consumerism, war, and the rigid conformity of state power. As a figure of child sacrifice through war or fire in the Bible, Moloch becomes a figure of irrational idolatry in "Howl"

which modern society revolves around. Similar to the story of the Golden Calf, but brought to the dark reality of the modern age, Ginsberg illustrates how the violent mechanisms of power sacrifice the young, new, and innovative for the regeneration of the dominant social order. This connection to the absurd and conformist idolatry is first indicated in the line, “what sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?” These references to the “cement” and “aluminum” of the idol of Moloch not only point out the industrial composition of modern society, but also to the inherent meaninglessness and absurdity of modern society to willfully sacrifice its workers and artistic innovators to its oppressive institutions and mechanisms. This is punctuated again by Ginsberg’s use of breath to illustrate this horrifying absurdity of modern life, with Moloch being “loveless!” “Mental” and “the heavy judger of men!” Moloch itself is the embodiment of the bureaucratic powers of modernity, it being the “incomprehensible prison... the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows... whose buildings are judgment... the vast stone of war! Moloch the

stunned governments!” This stark and absurd reading of the mechanical forces of modernity can be read in opposition to the regeneration myth employed in T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” which itself was a kind of idol to New Criticism academia. In “The Waste Land,” Eliot employs a plethora of classical, anthropological, and literary-critical sources to conjure the Grail Legend in order to illuminate Europe’s decline. From Wagner’s operas, From Ritual to Romance, and the cultural criticisms of Paul Valéry and Hermann Hesse, Eliot ultimately argues in “The Waste Land” that the figure of the Fisher King, symbolizing the ineffective and aging ruler(s) of Europe, must be sacrificed in order for authentic cultural renewal to continue. Ginsberg’s employment of Moloch then in “Howl” becomes the absolute antithesis to Eliot’s Fisher King, which Ginsberg uses to point out how the regeneration of the social order doesn’t actually sacrifice the aging ‘establishment,’ but instead absurdly and meaninglessly sacrifices the poor, working-class, creative, and youthful to the state mechanisms and institutions to uphold the balance of power.

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