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Dreaming of the Vegetable Kingdom:

A Marxist Critique of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

In 1956, Allen Ginsberg published "Howl," a lengthy three-part poem written by, for, and about the Beat generation. It is a remarkable work. Although a first reading may leave one bewildered by a mad onslaught of chaotic imagery, further readings unveil layer upon layer of complexity and meaning. Likewise, the Beats who provide its subject and object are impossible to take in at first glance; however, this essay attempts to provide a vantage point.

Few may know that the Beats coined their name to imply weariness (e.g., "I'm beat"). Later it came to connote an artistic enlightenment along the lines of a beatific vision ("Beat Movement" 1), and over time, both meanings became accurate descriptions for the Beats. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Beatrice is the voice of purity and guidance. Since the Beats were motivated by their search for "personal release, purification, and illumination" (1), it seems a beatific vision is exactly what they were seeking. They sought it by means of drugs, sex, Zen Buddhism, and jazz, and this, in addition to their loathing for "square" institutions, eventually alienated them from society. They were reduced to a faction whose reckless hedonism left them very "beat" indeed.

In my interpretation of "Howl," I find that the senselessness of the Beats' self-destruction is not as senseless as it may seem. A close look at this poem reveals that unified reasons do exist for and within the accounts of their revelry, their passion, and their pain. I intend to create a

context in which it is evident that the people described in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" are motivated by substantive convictions that deserve a measure of acknowledgment and respect. Before doing so, a distinction must be made: because this essay is a literary criticism, all further mention of the Beats is taken entirely from the text, unless stated otherwise. Whether the characters in the poem are anything like the people in the history books is contingent on the historical accuracy of the writing, but if there is any discrepancy, our priority falls on the characters.

One of the foundational interests of Ginsberg's Beats is the search for a transcendent realm of purity, as mentioned. Sometimes the path toward illumination is drugs; sometimes it is looking for "visionary Indian angels" (Ginsberg 12) or praying in "hopeless cathedrals" (18); consistently it is their love of jazz. However, the spiritual passion that motivated the Beats cannot alone describe the epic of their lives. The radical homosexual encounters in which they "blew and were blown by those human seraphim" (13), the tearful arrests which found them "weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down" (13), the nights spent wandering empty streets where no one cared whether they lived or died, coming and going and "leaving no broken hearts" (11), in addition to those moments of beauty in which they glimpsed a reality beyond their immediate situation – these instances paint a life filled with a heedless self-abuse standing hand-in-hand with the spiritual search. This somewhat oppositional combination is central to my understanding of the Beats in this poem. To make the relationship clearer, let us use a lens of critique provided by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In his book, Nietzsche describes Attic tragedy as a relationship between two contradictory methods of making sense out of life. One side is represented by austere Apollo, and the other, by frenzied Dionysus. While Apollo's elegant rationality contributes little to our

purpose, the similarity between Nietzsche's Dionysus and the Beats can shed a great deal of light on why I believe they expressed their aversion for society the way they did.

According to legend, Dionysus is a Greco-Roman deity associated with nature, fertility, wine, and ecstasy ("Dionysus" 3). Though he was originally portrayed as a bearded man, later depictions present him as youthful and effeminate (3). "Lavish festival *orgia* (rites)" (3) were widely celebrated in his honor, and he himself was said to represent "the sap, juice, or lifeblood" (3) of nature. Already these characteristics show much in common with the Beats, whose lives in the poem are so often an ecstatic intoxication, whose homosexual inclinations are associable with the later effeminate Dionysus, and whose search for enlightenment is indeed a quest to suck the very life-sap of existence. However, Nietzsche's use of Dionysus takes the correlation much further.

Perhaps most central to the worldview of the Dionysian is the belief that life is a place of suffering and despair, in which the only fitting response is, first, absolute hopelessness, and second, unthinking revelry in the fantastic fact of existence. It seems that the Beats of "Howl" are acquainted with this vein of thought. Their overwhelming drug abuse and sexual promiscuity can be seen as an indulgence both in despair as well as in the taintless ardor that they believed was being smothered by the conventions of society.

Here it is essential to note that if these passions are *being smothered*, it follows that they are being smothered *by something*. Though we must leave Nietzsche's lens to explore what the poem reveals this Something to be, later we will return to his perspective to flesh out our understanding of the Beats.

In Part II of "Howl," the Beats' enemy gains both a name and a personality: "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and

imagination? / Moloch!” (Ginsberg 21). The poetry that plunges on from here paints Moloch not with definitions, but associations and images. We do not yet know what it is; we start only by knowing what it is like.

To begin, Moloch is characterized by disembodiment: its “fate” is “a cloud of sexless hydrogen” (Ginsberg 22), and from within that cloud the poet writes, “I am a consciousness without a body” (22). Then, Moloch is typified by alienation. It removes humans from the substance of life, replacing love, sex, and soul with a grey mechanization: “Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks!” (22). Under its control, rationality becomes the substitute for enlightenment, and in this conflict between heart and mind, Moloch “whose name is the Mind!” (22) reigns supreme. The narrator laments: “Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch!” (Ginsberg 21), and continues lamenting, “Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!” (Ginsberg 22).

Thus the illumination for which the narrator lives has been precluded, brushed aside or swept away, until “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” (Marx 257). Like the bourgeoisie according to Karl Marx, Moloch has “drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation” (Marx 257). Although we hesitate still to determine exactly what Moloch is, we can be sure that this Something is able to eradicate the very meat of humanity, bringing about the forced reduction of elusive truth into tiny shells, boxes, and categories. In this, Moloch strips life of its very essence. People go on calling things by the old names, but the heart – the beauty and passion – has disintegrated beneath them.

Ginsberg’s choice of Moloch as a symbol is powerful, considering the historical background of the deity. The name is derived from combining the consonants of the Hebrew

word *melech* (or “king”) with the vowels of *boshet* (or “shame”) (“Moloch” 2). The juxtaposition creates a contrast that characterizes Moloch as a devouring ruler. Throughout the ancient Middle East, servants of Moloch would sacrifice their children to the god (2), an ugly truth that serves as a dramatic metaphor for the oppression under which the Beats live. The god that demands the offspring of one’s loins is a personality whose demands infringe upon the very tissue of its servants. Ginsberg writes: “They broke their backs lifting Moloch to heaven” (22). They break their strength, offer their flesh, and throw their children to the flames. If the Beats’ central motivation is to savor the life-sap of the soul, then Moloch, devouring ruler, is the entity that has alienated them not simply from society, but from the truth, purity, and enlightenment they seek.

At last it becomes possible to make hypotheses concerning what Moloch is. Could it be religion? Can we say it is simply the sum of all people who reject Beat culture? I believe that if these answers do pertain to Moloch, they are only manifestations of a far more encompassing reality. In my interpretation, I understand Moloch as *ideology exercising its influence through the superstructure of society*.

If we imagine that society is a building, then entities such as government, media, economics, fashion trends, religion, and the education system (to name a few) are the raw materials – the brick, steel, and mortar. Working together to give the building form and balance, these entities are the superstructure, the beams and uprights that define the boundaries of what people think and do. However, while the superstructure does prescribe people’s normative limits, it is prescribed in turn by an element rooted beneath it, at its base. Dwelling below the constructs of society, this deeper element supports and is supported by them. Though it is not easy to give it a neat title, we may refer to the force beneath society as “ideology.”

Louis Althusser, a philosopher on this subject, defines ideology as “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group” (158). In other words, ideology is the body of beliefs and presuppositions that constitutes a societal worldview. It affects people on both a public and private scale, through society’s public and private superstructure. Publicly, one’s life is directed by obvious “concrete” factors such as legal ordinances and economic set-up. Secondly and more elusively, members of society are indoctrinated on a personal level as they grow into adulthood, with the views embedded in their religious, educational, and family systems. Thus ideology, working through superstructure, determines the public rules within which people make a living and pursue their goals, as well as the lens by which they personally see the world. This lens is so ingrained that they rarely question or even notice it. Even if they do come to criticize it, they can never fully “step outside the box.”

Marxist classics divide the superstructure of society into two categories, as we did when we distinguished “public” from “private.” The first is “the State apparatus,” which they define as “not only... the police, the courts, the prisons; but also the army... and above this ensemble, the head of State, the government and administration” (Althusser 137). Beside this is the second category, which Althusser calls “the ideological State apparatus” (142) encompassing family, communications (or media), the religious, the educational, the legal, the political, and the cultural (143). Although various constructs within these categories can seem unrelated to each other, or “disparate” (146) in Althusser’s words, again, they are connected on a sub-surface level by ideology, which remains unified “despite its diversity and contradictions” (146). I propose that however one chooses to categorize the disparate fragments of superstructure, it is the means by which Moloch, the ideology beneath the system, expresses itself and exercises its power: using

violence (arrests and wars), as well as the trends and views that drive society (Althusser 145). Both methods of control – violence and views – play a role in “Howl.”

Violence is implemented in more than one way. As seen above, armies and arrests are Moloch’s instruments of action: “Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!” (21). Those instruments are designed to crush interference. When the Beats transgress the rules that Moloch imposes, impending punishment resounds from every corner: “the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed” (13). Standing directly behind the armies and arrests are the systems of court, government, and administration, instruments of a slightly less literal, but no less potent, violence. Here Moloch is called “the soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows” as well as the “heavy judger of men” (21).

After this, Moloch’s violence becomes more subtle. Consider the power of the economic system. Without involving physical bloodshed, by distributing or withholding money it is able to motivate, subdue, and control. The Beats feel this third violence keenly: the narrator writes that they “lost their loveboys to the... heterosexual dollar” (14); Moloch’s “blood is running money” (21), and this money is “unobtainable” (21). Refusing to comply with society’s norms they are unable to make a living, faced instead by the stark alternative of poverty, which at its extreme leads to death.

A fourth violence rears from the education system, and again its power is not in bloodshed but discrimination. The Beats reject what is taught in their schools by being “crazy” and “publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull” (Ginsberg 9), for the schools, associated here with the imagery of death, indoctrinate children with the ideology of Moloch. In a demonstration of subtle violence, the Beats are consequentially “expelled from the academies” (Ginsberg 9).

Finally, a fifth violence is found in the discriminations of media, marketing, and trends. “Howl” describes the Beats being “burned alive in their innocent flannel suits... amid blasts of leaden verse and tanked-up clatter of iron regiments of fashion and the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising and the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors” (16). Whether by arrest, incarceration, poverty, expulsion, or ridicule and disregard, Moloch employs violence to silence those who resist its voice.

Yet violence is only one of two effective tools. As mentioned, Moloch is equally efficient at shaping society’s views, its vehicle. In Marx’s writings, he names not Moloch but the bourgeoisie as villain; yet his villain and Ginsberg’s share some things in common. According to Marx the bourgeoisie “draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. ...It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image” (Marx 258). In “Howl,” the entity that shapes and motivates society’s constructs does so by dominating the presuppositions, ideals, and norms within individual minds, encompassing them in its own framework until it, like Marx’s bourgeoisie, succeeds in conforming the world to “its own image.”

Ginsberg writes, “Moloch, whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovas” (21), suggesting an indomitably reigning force. He goes on to say, “Moloch, who entered my soul early” (22). Even while children are in the womb, they are subject to the influence of ideology simply by the way their parents talk to and about them. After birth, children are influenced by the expectations placed upon them, as well as the names they are given. Althusser phrases it this way: “before its birth, the child is... always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is

‘expected’ once it has been conceived” (176). Seeing this influence as an exercise of corruption, the narrator of “Howl” writes that Moloch “frightened me out of my natural ecstasy” (22). This statement resonates with the Wordsworthian stance, in which true purity is most characteristic of raw nature and youth; of all things these are least corrupted by the stains of oppressive ideology.

If Moloch were a human, or even a god, perhaps it could be defeated. However, the Beats can only fail in their fight – a fact they know. Moloch is not alive; it is machine. As Althusser explores Marx’s writings, he says: “the State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus. The State is a ‘machine’ of repression, which enables the ruling classes... to ensure their domination over the working class” (137). Within the machine’s control, Marx saw society “daily and hourly enslaved,” as each member “becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him” (Marx 260). In “Howl” Part I, the Beats, searching for transcendence while mired in the system, are “burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night” (Ginsberg 9). In Part II, the name “machinery” is directly applied to Moloch, the very essence of societal oppression, “whose mind is pure machinery!” (21). The Beats’ aversion for the machine answers why they “broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons” (13) when they were arrested: the narrator sees himself within the inescapable, all-encompassing grind of filthy gears, one appendage among other miserable appendages. Here there is no question why the Beats loathed their “square” society. In Marx’s words: “The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful, and the more embittering it is” (Marx 260).

At last we can see the nature of the Dionysian in the Beats once more. They saw and reviled the Moloch behind society, and consequentially, like Nietzsche’s Dionysus, they

intimately knew the “terror and horror of existence” (Nietzsche 42). Whereas society remains oblivious of its condition, the Beats dwell below the surface within the “hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge” (46), which deceptive ideologies veil from common sight. In fact their reaction to society is directed not only against Moloch’s insatiable demands, but also against the veil of convention that blinds society to the ravages of its ruler, painting ghastly Moloch in the acceptable colors of normalcy. The result is that combination of opposites which defines the Beats’ experience in “Howl:” a fervent search for love and light, coupled with a zealous self-destruction.

Why destroy oneself? Being aware of a better reality, while knowing that escape from oppression is impossible, leaves one in a desperate tangle of truths. The Beats’ only hope, their only meaning, is laid up somewhere beyond reach, maddeningly unattainable. Within this lesser world, there is nothing to live for. When despair is so real, why not destroy oneself?

Nietzsche communicates the element of despair in *The Birth of Tragedy* when he writes of ancient King Midas, who hunted and captured the Dionysian demigod Silenus in the forest. The king asks “wise Silenus” what is “the best and most desirable of all things for man,” and Silenus answers with the following: “Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon” (Nietzsche 42).

Ginsberg describes the Beats’ situation powerfully when he writes that they “cooked rotten animals lung heart feet tail borsht & tortillas dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom” (16). Of all symbols, what can better drive home the reality of complete participation than the symbol of eating? To cook and eat, to take food into oneself, is for the eater to become the food,

and for the food to become the eater. In order to sustain their existence, the Beats were forced to give themselves over in this participation. They ate the “rotten animals” that pressed them on every side, but they longed for something dramatically opposed to rancid flesh: the “pure vegetable kingdom.” That kingdom was sometimes glimpsed, always believed, but never grasped. In this context it is understandable that the Beats obey the impulse to throw everything away, even the holy and precious things, in a destructive statement of despair.

The actions described in “Howl” scream that nothing matters, because all is lost. Destroying the holy things is meaningless, thus they may as well (and must) be destroyed. So the Beats “danced on broken wineglasses smashed phonographic records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steam-whistles” (Ginsberg 17). This passage is a near-unbelievable demonstration of hopelessness, because of all things jazz is one of the Beats’ most revered loves. They cut the flesh of their feet on wineglass and sear the flesh of their souls by breaking records of holy jazz, listed among the essentials of life right along with “sex and soup” (12), and still the system wails its dominance, whether in the voice of external sirens or internal steam-whistles. This reality motivates the Beats to careen through life alternately neglecting their needs (depriving themselves of sleep, food, and shelter) and destroying themselves through drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases.

However, one must not forget the extraordinary delight that accompanies their despair. The Beats embody the Dionysian horror of life, but in Nietzsche’s words, “If we add to their terror the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man... we steal a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysian” (36). Not only do the Beats break themselves in their despair, but they also thirst keenly for the “fantastic excess of life” (Nietzsche 41). Hence the lengthy

passages in “Howl” that detail the many intoxications as well as the huge (and almost comical) number of sexual encounters.

Some readers may be surprised to learn that historically, not all of the people whom “Howl” enshrines “got over” their revelry as most do, passing through youthful rebellion into more prudent patterns later. Many Beats continued their lifestyle into old age. This implies that it was not “just a stage,” though it does not resemble the composure of outsiders. That composure is not something the Beats of “Howl” valued. In the words of Nietzsche:

There are some who, from obtuseness or lack of experience, turn away... with contempt or pity born of the consciousness of their own “healthy-mindedness.” But of course such poor wretches have no idea how corpselike and ghostly their so-called “healthy-mindedness” looks when the glowing life of the Dionysian revelers roars past them (36).

It seems the Beat lifestyle is a testimony that, although no one can be truly free under the control of an oppressor, still there is a transcendent reality behind the oppression which must not be forgotten. Perhaps one cannot experience it fully, but it can be glimpsed and sought, and in the meantime the passion of life is reason enough to celebrate amidst despair. The Beats of “Howl” embrace their situation as Dionysus does, wandering the streets in desolation, in ecstasy, and in pain, alternately indulging and destroying themselves. All the while, their lives manifest the underlying state of their souls. They lament; they weep. Their very hearts are shattered in the gears of that restless machinery, Moloch. They “walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks (Ginsberg 15), and they echoed the dying words of Jesus crucified with a God-forsaken “eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani” (20).

Out of this combination of suffering and bliss, redemption springs up in the form of art. Ginsberg writes that, despite the futility of their pilgrimage and protest within Moloch's grip, the Beats "rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz... and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into a... saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio" (20). In these words stirs a breath of hope, as the "lamentation itself becomes a song of praise" (Nietzsche 46). The epic of "Howl" is written as painfully and dearly as if the ink bled from the very veins of its generation, and the Beats who lived this story sacrificed themselves for their convictions, recording "the romance of the streets" (Ginsberg 15) with their own blood and flesh. As a result, like Dionysus, the Beats have themselves "become a work of art" (Nietzsche 37), or in Ginsberg's words: "the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death... rose... with the absolute poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years" (20). Even if it is impossible for them to truly escape the dominion of Moloch, the final words of "Howl" Part III form a eulogy of ecstatic blessing in which all the world is holy, and the sacrifice of the Beats' bodies and souls becomes another avenue for cathartic exultation. Here is where the flavor of their victory can be all but tasted, if only for a moment.

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