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# On Allen Ginsberg, 'Howl' and Trotsky.

My argument is stated succinctly and argued to its conclusion. I contest that Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* was, as some critics argue a popular, 'an over-simplification' of the poetry regarded by the Canon as high-quality literature. Rather, *Howl* formed a new genre which mirrored in its innovation other seminal moments in literature connected to changes of the 'mode of production' and had similar ramifications. The 'primitive accumulation of capital of English capitalism' that Caudwell (1937) *Illusion and Reality* associated with William Shakespeare, the 'bourgeois' revolutions that permeate the ideas of Wordsworth (1802) *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* and the shocks of Darwinism, Freud and imperialist war which informed Modernist literature, particularly the avant-garde pertinently T.S.Eliot (1922) *The Waste Land*. What was the problem of the writer in late-capitalism as High Modernism entered its death throes? Trotsky (1981) *Art and Politics* encapsulate it:

"The decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, art suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society. Art cannot save itself...But precisely in this path history has set a formidable snare for the artist."

- Trotsky (1981). p 105.

Ginsberg's reply is *Howl*, this is not the howl of the deranged madman outside of History, it resonates within the conversation of literature, *King Lear* (1603):

"Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones;  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack."

- Shakespeare (1603) (5.3.2.58-64).

Howl

For Carl Solomon

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I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipster burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night

- Ginsberg (1956) p. 9

It is the howl of a post-WW 11 avant-garde that must inherently employ the poetic devices of literary tradition but in a different 'form'. A 'close reading' gives us several insights here. They are 'howls' of emotion, of intense emotion and resonate with William Wordsworth (1802) *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility."

- William Wordsworth (1980) pp. 410-424.

In Shakespeare (1603) we have a reference to the howling of a man driven to madness seeking justice from 'heaven's vaults'. Ginsberg also seeks refuge in chants to the 'Holy' in Footnote to *Howl*. The thematic howl of a literate madness, seeking divine justice, but not locating it in a corrupted 'world' runs counterintuitive against the whole Enlightenment project. Surely Reason and empiricist science will hear the poet's words. For Americans like Ginsberg the world could not be explained in these neat confines and as a poet who had read widely he certainly could not accept the text by text alone reductionism of the New Criticism after Hiroshima and McCarthyism, Auschwitz and Stalinism. But what differentiated Ginsberg from other 'Beat' writers in particular Kerouac was that he rejected Kerouac insistence on 'first thought, best thought'. Ginsberg was influenced by both Kerouac in terms of first impulse, but also poets like Eliot, indeed *Howl* is an attempt at reproducing something of the literary magnitude of Eliot (1922) *The Waste Land*. I shall therefore argue against the perspective taken by advocates of Mass Culture Thesis such as the renegade ex-Trotskyist Dwight Macdonald, who argues in (1953) *A Theory of Mass Culture* and again (1962) *Against the American Grain* that the collective taste of the 'masses' was reflected in the degraded mass culture that they consumed and that, therefore, they had no 'interest' in 'High Culture'. Dwight Macdonald combined an ex-Trotskyist stance with cultural conservatism and elitism. Also, I argue against a rightist conservative position which is derived from Matthew Arnold (1869) *Culture and Anarchy* that has an inherent trepidation at the sound of the popular and its revolutionary proclivities. He maintained a 'secular religion' of

"The best that has been thought and said in the world."

- Arnold (1869) p 6.

Was needed to prevent the erosion of civilization. It is no accident that Arnold began his opus magnum in 1867 after a period of popular and vigorous discontent over suffrage rights. Ginsberg's reply here is the 20th century equivalent to an articulate and insurrectionary mob assailing Arnold:

“who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose...”

- Ginsberg 1956 p 20.

Arnold and his Leavisite descendants would be battered and lost for words, their Weltanschauung challenged. Also here we can perceive Ginsberg's specialist use of 'strophes' which he defines as 'a one speech breath thought' which was akin to the jazz improvisation of Miles Davis or Charlie Parker, the black man's 'beat'. 'Form' with a regard for socio-cultural factors would be engaged by the New Historicism of Raymond Williams with his 1958 *Forward to Culture and Society*:

We live in an expanding culture, yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions.

- Lodge (1972) p. 580.

However, my position is not simply that Mass Culture Thesis and the New Criticism were erroneous, but they failed to understand the nuanced nature of 'proletarian literature' which as Trotsky illustrates is complexified:

“Having broken up human relations into atoms, bourgeois society, had a great aim for itself. Personal emancipation was its name. In reality, all modern literature has been nothing but an enlargement of this theme.”

- Trotsky (1981) pp. 61-62.

My position is that only the proletariat has the creative potential and socially universal nature which allowed Marx to say 'communism has solved the riddle of history' can transcend the limitations of the bourgeois intelligentsia when the social and economic conditions are ripe, that is, in a Socialist society because as Marx argued they are the 'universal class'. For the first time in history was there a social collectivity in whose interest it was to dismantle class society, because 'class' fetters on the workers of the world are their 'chains and it is in their interest 'collectively' to break those chains freeing the whole of society.

Some Marxists misunderstood the nature of the relationship between the popular and the high cultures. Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* saw an implied analogy between Marx's concept of his fetishized 'exchange value' as a commodity and 'use-value' a 'material object'. Then they extrapolated this analogy to the relationship between popular and high culture to the detriment of the popular. Walter Benjamin is better here, seeing the potential for mechanized reproduction to free the poet from the 'aura' from his or her primitivism and allow an engaged mass readership. Also, I will draw a parallel with Maxim Gorky, *Lower Depths* (see Raskin 2004 p.82) and Ginsberg *Howl*, thus Trotsky:

“At the beginning, Gorky was imbued with the romantic individualism of the tramp. Nevertheless, he fed the early spring revolutionism of the proletariat on the eve of 1905, because he helped to

awaken individuality in that class in which individuality, once awakened, seeks contact with other awakened individualities”

- Trotsky (1981) p 58-59

For Trotsky the solution to the dichotomy of oversimplification and complexity in literature is resolved in the synthesis of revolution. Ginsberg, unlike Gorky would not be involved in a social revolution (as he may have wished) but a cultural revolution, a revolution of superstructure rather than of social base which left American capitalism weakened but intact. Louis Althusser (2006) Lenin on Philosophy and Other Essays commenting on the novels of Solzhenitsyn in (Althusser pp.153-153, 2006) makes the point of the difference between art and knowledge. Literature like Solzhenitsyn's, he argues, may have helped the reader 'feel', 'perceive' the 'cult of personality' in the Soviet Union but doesn't provide the scientific knowledge to understand it. Althusser said art:

“In the language of Spinoza it puts the conclusions before the premises.”

- Althusser (2010) p 153.

Ginsberg achieves this by employing and developing poetic devices, Walt Whitman's 'long-line' which is a non-metrical line of poetry of length which usually employs enjambment, anaphora which is a 'figure of repetition' in which the same word is repeated as in Part 1 'Who' usually at the beginning successive 'lines, clauses or sentences', cauda or the tail-rhyme stanza and a surrealist juxtaposition of images such as 'helium jukebox' (1956). Also Ginsberg aspired to create: 'Certain combinations of words and rhythms actually have

“an electrochemical reaction on the body, which could catalyze specific states of consciousness.”

- Ginsberg (2001) p.31

Brain Jackson (2010) argues: 'the most compelling example of reading "Howl" -specially out loud – is the sense of time shifting from the prosaic to the mythical. Lines such as:

“who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowdeck docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steamheat opium,”

- Ginsberg (1956) p. 15

He continues:

'the rhythmic and trouping artifice of Howl constitute...a suspension of time in which the natural laws occur'.

- Jackson (2010) pp 312-313).

Therefore I maintain that Ginsberg poetry contradicted the ideas of thinkers such as Mathew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity on the Right and renegade Trotskyists

like Dwight MacDonald and neo-Marxists Adorno and Horkheimer. I suggest that the neo-Marxism of Louis Althusser enhanced my general understanding of the positioning of the debates regarding the poetry of Ginsberg, particularly Howl and that in this context it is possible to comprehend him in a lineage of literati. Finally I argue that Ginsberg created not a simplified poetry for mass consumption and 'narcotization' of literary consciousness, but formed the matrix for a new genre of second wave of 20th century avant-garde writers who took and added to the High Modernism of 1910-39 and created a wedge into the monotonous conformity of 1950's poetry. Even poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who were writing confessional verse which was challenging some conventions in terms of gender and 'content' i.e. mental illness Plath ([1963] 2004) Ariel and Sexton's (1960) 'To Bedlam and part way back' were not really contesting the terrain of bourgeois hegemony. Ginsberg did shift the aesthetics of the hegemonic superstructure cultural construct in favour of the 'progressive', he unlocks much in this poem, but he was unable to create a social revolution. I conclude that the task can only be brought to fruition by the self-emancipation of the proletariat as Leon Trotsky argues in Literature and Revolution:

"Under Socialism, Literature and art will be tuned to a different key such as disinterested friendship, this will be the mighty ringing chords of Socialist poetry. However, does not an excess of solidarity, as the Nietzscheans fear, threaten to degenerate man into a sentimental, passive, herd animal? No, not at all. The powerful force of competition this, in bourgeois society, has the character of market competition, will not disappear in a Socialist society, but, to use the language of psycho-analysis, will be sublimated, Art then will become the most perfect ethos for progressive life-building of life in every field."

- Leon Trotsky (1981). p 60

The Beats could not vanquish 'Moloch' (essentially, 'Capitalism') but they did undermine, disrupted what Lyotard calls it 'meta-narrative' creating the conditions for minority narratives. Nevertheless, only socialist transformation as understood in the aesthetic writings of Trotsky can create authentic liberation for all of humanity. We may read Ginsberg as a disappointed, reincarnated Maxim Gorky lapsing into a hope for Nirvana with a juxtaposition of the social and questioning 'Who' of Part 1, with the devastation of Moloch only relieved with the introspection of fifteen iambs in two sentences, one 'long-line' without punctuation except the repeated and insistent exclamation marks after each Holy! Footnote to Howl pp 27-8. Ginsberg did provide hope in a new 'beatification' of language within Historical Materialism's philosophy, a new Communist International to resurrect Trotsky's Fourth International...

'holy the Fifth International!' (ibid).

By Ilich.

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