

## **Howler of Nature and Revolt - Allen Ginsberg and the Making of a Counter Culture**

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### **Abstract**

*As the father of the Beat Generation and the prophet of the 1960s, Allen Ginsberg ushered in a new literature movement. His masterpiece *Howl* marks that something new of American literature has already begun. But he is more than a literature figure. His influence to the counter culture movement of America in the 1960s is far reaching. Actually, it is hard to overestimate the role of Allen Ginsberg in the turbulent 60s and his influence continues in the later years*

When I was talking with an American friend, a man of about fifty named Paul Young, about the 1960s in America, he got quite emotional. When I asked his opinion about Allen Ginsberg, he was very excited and replied, "He's the icon of the turbulent 60s and the prophet of the counter culture. You cannot fully know and understand the 60s in America without thoroughly understand him and his works. As a protest poet, he initiated a new style of American literature. Yet this is far from just a literature movement. It is a social and political movement intimately connected with the protest activities in the 60s." Indeed, not anyone who has some knowledge of the 60s can thoroughly judge the sixtieth without mentioning Allen Ginsberg. As a poet, artist, professor, and agitator bearing unofficial titles such as the "father of the Beat Generation," the "prophet of the 1960s," and the "guru of the counterculture movement," it is hard to overestimate the role of Allen Ginsberg in the turbulent 60s and his influence continues in the later years.

As the father of the Beat Generation and the prophet of the 1960s, Allen Ginsberg ushered in a new literature movement that soon spread to a social and cultural phenomenon. The sixtieth is a period of chaos and radical changes. The seed of that turbulence is actually of native born and it can be traced back to 1955. It was in that year that certain bohemians of San Francisco received the invitation to a poem reading at the Six Gallery in the North Beach. The invitation had been set out by Allen Ginsberg. The poem he read out was named *Howl* which became his masterpiece and established Ginsberg a reputation as a prophet of the counter culture movement. Ginsberg wrote better poems later. However, what made *Howl* remarkable is that "it expressed what few felt then, and so many felt so soon."<sup>1</sup> No poem has ever rejected so many of the beliefs of the society it was written in.

More importantly, what is noticeable of *Howl* is that it marks something new of American literature that had already begun. This has come to be known as the Beat movement with Ginsberg as the representative and leader held together by other poets of talent as Jack Kerouac, William F. Burroughs, John Clellon Holmes, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Ginsberg and his colleagues truly prophesied of a new consciousness. In the post world war era when many Americans were content to pursue consumer culture, the Beats had perceived the dark and depressed side of the society. They found that the society was under the rule of technocracy. Technocracy means a kind of social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration. The results of technocracy were that it mechanizes the human soul and creativity. Technocracy takes away the emotion, feeling, and creative thoughts from human mind and make the human race depended on technology and mechanized society.

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<sup>1</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Times*, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, INC., 1976) p. 322

The main protest against technocracy is elaborated in Ginsberg's *Howl* through Moloch, the biblical heathen god of fire to which children was sacrificed. Ginsberg used the term to refer to the god of technocracy. He howled, "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, angel headed hipsters, burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night." "Moloch, whose mind is purely machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!"

The beats and the emerging counter culture represented a major backlash against the placid rigidity and regularity of the conformist 50's mentality, unquestioning in its own smug righteousness, values, and pursuit of privilege. They sought out experiences that were more intensely "real" and "natural." Sometimes "real" experiences meant physical pleasures such as sex and drugs or more spiritual pursuits such as Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism. The word "beat" represents a non-conformist, rebellious attitude toward conventional values concerning sex, religion, and American way of life, an attitude which results from the feeling of depression and exhaustion and the need to escape into an unconventional mode of life. As a literature movement, the beat writers went against the ideals of the mainstream culture. They ushered in a new writing style known as the improvisatory style. This can be seen from the change of style of Ginsberg's works. His early poems possess a far greater sense of control and structure than his later works and there is a willingness to be brief and to the point. By the early fifties, however, Ginsberg has abandoned these conventional literary features in favor of a spontaneous flow and unchecked flow of language. From this point on, everything he writes has the appearance of being served up raw. There is never the trace of a revised line. His intention is clear: lacking of revision and decoration marks the poem natural, therefore honest. They are the real thing, not the artifice.

The intention of his poetry of the middle fifties was, said Ginsberg, "to just write ...let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble the magic lines from my real head."<sup>2</sup> Yet the Beats are more than a literature movement. They are a social movement as well. The terms "Beat" and "Beatnik" soon moved beyond Ginsberg and his colleagues and out into the popular culture, attracting a popular following among disaffected youth. Some of these people followed their own version of the Beat lifestyle, but without producing poetry, novels, and other creative expressions. Once the term hit the popular culture, however, it attracted still more people who knew little of the real Beats, but wanted to look like them. Many adopted a stereotypical version of Beat fashion styles, sporting sandals, black turtlenecks, black berets, and goatee beards. These stereotypes found their way into popular culture, most notably in television. Ginsberg himself was aware of the connection between the Beats and the counter culture. He talked about the continuity from Beats to the 60s. He mentioned drugs, music, the interest in East, the preoccupation with the tradition of Whitman and Thoreau. The core of the movement, he said, was "the return to nature and the revolt against the machine."<sup>3</sup>

Is the youthful political activism of the sixties has anything different from that of the thirties? If the difference shows up anywhere, "it reveals itself in the unprecedented penchant for the occult, for the magic, and for exotic ritual which has become an integral part of the counter culture."<sup>4</sup> A tendency for mystic, occult, and magical phenomena has been a marked characteristic of the postwar counter culture since the days of the Beats. Allen Ginsberg was one of the gurus who discovered Zen and the mystic tradition of the Orient and introduced them to America. Zen, a Buddhist notion emphasizing on meditation and insight, gradually became a popular religion among young Americans. The focus of Zen is on spiritualism related to body, earth, sex and etc. Through Zen Ginsberg observes a beat that is far removed from the beat of dancing feet, but rather finds in the shuffling of human beings which is the mystic measure of their passions. In this visionary experience one can feel that the world may be redeemed by the willingness to take it for what it is and to find its enchanting promise within the seemingly dispiritualized waste. Ginsberg told us that he did not find the Zen satori (state of spiritual enlightenment which is a spiritual objective of Zen) until 1954. Though Zen introduced to America runs the risk of being flawed and simplified, what matters is that it promoted a youth culture that is to counter the joyless, rapacious, and egomania order of the technological society.

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday Company, 1969) p149

<sup>3</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Times*, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, INC., 1976) p325

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday Company, 1969) p156

It makes the youthful disaffiliation of the time a cultural phenomenon, rather than merely a political movement. It strikes beyond ideology to the level of consciousness, seeking to transform people's deepest sense of self, the other, and the environment. What is far more important is Ginsberg's deeply felt necessity to turn away from the dominant culture in order to find the spiritual expressions of humanity and compassionate protest. In addition, Ginsberg as America's Zen guru is far from an isolated eccentric, but rather he is one of the foremost spokesmen of the younger generation. Actually, Ginsberg claims greater audience among the dissenting youth than any Christian or Jewish clergymen could hope to reach or stir.<sup>5</sup>

Ginsberg has made his contribution to this exotic ritual for demonstration and it has become a strategy of the youth protest. In 1966, Ginsberg wrote a poem entitled *How to make a March/ Spectacle*, which influenced the character of much of the demonstrating the young have been doing ever since. The thesis of the poem is that demonstrations should put aside their usually grave and fierce quality in favor of a festive dancing and chanting parade that would pass out balloons and flowers, candy and kisses, bread and wine to everyone along the line of March. The atmosphere should be one of gaiety and affection, governed by the intention to attract or seduce participation from the usually impassive bystanders, or at least to overcome suspicions and hostilities.<sup>6</sup> Ginsberg grounded such measures of demonstration on the Zen principles of offering no resistant target at which he can strike back. Clearly, the cause of the happy parade is anti-war. The strategy is to create a mood of peacefulness, generosity, and tenderness that may melt the rigidities of opponents and more importantly demonstrate what good political principles are. Though in the late years of the 60s, protestors adopted more violent and drastic measures and revolutionary festivals can never replace necessary radical means, the strategy is, stated by Roszak, "a significant revision of the art of demonstration"<sup>7</sup>.

If injustice could be eliminated by conventional organization of unions and lobbies, it should have been removed long before. The fact is evils remain in the society. So the young Americans had good reasons to try other measures. "The spirit of the fifties was neo-classical, formal; the sixties were expressive, romantic, free form."<sup>8</sup> This strategy of protest may be better embodied the spirit of the sixties. Ginsberg continued to write creatively after the 60s. He wrote more than forty books of poetry in his lifetime, working up to his death in 1997. His uncensored free-verse style produced as much controversy among academics as his profanity did among the government authorities. However, despite the disdain and censorship thrown in Ginsberg's path, *Howl* has become the required reading on college campuses throughout the United States, and his *Fall of America* won the National Book Award in 1972. He was also a member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters. Though he has become a major figure on the contemporary scene, he is still remembered as the spokesman of the Beat generation and the counter culture in the 60s and will probably go on as such in American history.

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday Company, 1969) p. 143

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday Company, 1969) p. 165

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 170

<sup>8</sup> Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*(New York, Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 101