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Allen Ginsberg

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Allen Ginsberg, Psychiatric Patient and Poet

As a result of moving to San Francisco in 1954, after his psychiatric hospitalization, Allen Ginsberg made a complete transformation from his repressed, fragmented early life to his later life as an openly gay man and public figure in the hippie and environmentalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. He embodied many contradictory beliefs about himself and his literary abilities. His early life in Paterson, New Jersey, was split between the realization that he was a literary genius (Hadda 237) and the desire to escape his chaotic life as the primary caretaker for his schizophrenic mother (Schumacher 8). This traumatic early life may have lead to the development of borderline personality disorder, which became apparent once he entered Columbia University. Although Ginsberg began writing poetry and protest letters to *The New York Times* beginning in high school, the turning point in his poetry, from conventional works, such as *Dakar Doldrums* (1947), to the experimental, such as *Howl* (1955-1956), came during his eight month long psychiatric hospitalization while a student at Columbia University. Although many critics ignore the importance of this hospitalization, I agree with Janet Hadda, a psychiatrist who examined Ginsberg's public and private writings, in her assertion that hospitalization was a turning point that allowed Ginsberg to integrate his probable borderline personality disorder with his literary gifts to create a new form of poetry.

Ginsberg's Early Life

As a child, Ginsberg expressed a strong desire for a conventional, boring life, where nothing exciting or remarkable ever happened. He frequently escaped the chaos of

his mother's paranoid schizophrenia (Schumacher 11) through compulsive trips to the movies (Hadda 238-39) and through the creation of a puppet show called "A Quiet Evening with the Jones Family" (239). As a teenager, Ginsberg also experienced a conflict between his pronounced desire for conformity and his innate understanding of himself as a genius. As he wrote in his diaries, "'If some future historian or biographer wants to know what the genius thought & did in his tender years, here it is. I'll be a genius of some kind or other, probably in literature'" (237). These private musings on his desire for boring normalcy and his feeling of conflict in his life contrast with the appearance he presented to other family members, who did not see any outward evidence of brewing psychological troubles during the time he spent as his mother's caretaker (Aronson). This desire for conventionality appeared to overshadow his sense of himself as a genius, and resulted in many experiments with repressing his homosexuality (Aronson). Self-doubt regarding his intellectual ability contrasts sharply with the confidence expressed by the rest the future Beats (Aronson), whom he met at Columbia University, and is further complicated by his repressed sexual desire for Neal Cassady (Sterritt 77).

"Dakar Doldrums" (1947)

Despite the inner and outer turmoil of this early phase of Ginsberg's life, his first collection of poems is conventional, almost archaic, in word choice, punctuation, and arrangement on the page. "Dakar Doldrums," a prize-winning poem hidden in the appendix *of Empty Mirror: Gates of Wrath (1947-1952),* demonstrates the start of unconventional themes in Ginsberg's poetry. "Dakar Doldrums," a poem in multiple sections, was written as a love poem expressing the author's never-ending desire for

another man, Neal Cassady (Sterritt 77). At this point in Ginsberg's life and poetic career, he concealed the identity of the true object of desire; a similar type of cloaking can be seen in some of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Most dear, and dearest at this moment most,
Since this my love for thee is thus more free
Than that I cherished more dear and lost;
Most near, now nearest where I fly from thee:
Thy love most consummated is in absence,
Half for the trust I have for thee in mind,
Half for the pleasures of thee in remembrance-—
Thou art most full and fair of all thy kind. (1-8)

In this opening stanza from "Dakar Doldrums," the archaic formality of the language is immediately apparent. The use of "thee" and "thy" creates a "polished imitation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British poets" (Tytell 636) that hides his true sexual desire in linguistic forms popular prior to the 1800s, thereby diminishing the possibility that readers will detect a non-traditional subject. In the opening stanza, the poet exhibits some playfulness, suggestive of a person still in pursuit of a potential love interest.

Although this interpretation is clearly suggested by the poem, the truth is that by the time "Dakar Doldrums" was written in late 1947, Ginsberg had already unsuccessfully pursued Cassady across the country (Hadda 238), been rejected, and sailed to Dakar, Senegal, where he intended to commit suicide by jumping off the balcony of the ship in harbor (Raskin 75). When that suicide attempt failed, Ginsberg decided to lose himself in Dakar through anonymous sexual encounters with mostly

underage boys (75). The poem retains its measured stanzas and consistent form, in contrast to the chaotic feelings, strong attachments to certain individuals, and suicidal impulses shaping the poet's interior life. At this point in Ginsberg's career as a writer, the reader sees no indication that he is translating a disordered mental state onto the page. This split between a measured, controlled form and Ginsberg's actual experiences would be bridged following his release from the Psychiatric Institute at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

Psychiatric Hospitalization

In the months leading up to his hospitalization, Ginsberg began to devote himself to the pursuit of a drug-fueled lifestyle, led by the heroin addict and small-time criminal Herbert Huncke and the foundational Beat writer William Burroughs (Sterritt 67). Enmeshed in this lifestyle, Ginsberg began coming out as gay to members of the emerging New York Beat scene. While gaining confidence in his gay identity and using drugs to further his poetic imagination, Ginsberg also began psychoanalysis with Burroughs, who was completely untrained in analysis (Aronson), as a means of coping with the growing symptoms of borderline personality disorder, including his involvement in risky behavior. Eventually, after having entered the Psychiatric Institute as part of a plea-bargain following his arrest as an accessory to one of Huncke's thefts, Ginsberg did make an honest accounting of his mental state on the intake paperwork at the hospital (Hadda 239). Additionally, in his diary, a few weeks before the hospitalization, Ginsberg expressed deep fears for his sanity and his propensity to hallucinate. He felt his life was over in his early twenties.

Yet, in the midst of this despair, he was also consumed with his characteristic split identity. He continued to believe he had a chance at overcoming his symptoms of borderline personality disorder, and that he was not fated to follow his mother's deteriorating course, although he felt a deep connection between their two lives (Aronson).

> "I am about to put an end to my life, only now there is no worry as to how I will do it, as last summer after the vision. In the hospital I hope to be cured. My images tell me that hours of truth are at hand. I am not going to die, I am going to live anew. My thought has been peaceful all week. I have been reading *The Possessed*. My devils are going to be cast out. . . . Tonite [sic] all is well . . . what a terrible future. I am 23, the year of the iron birthday, the gate of darkness. I am ill." (Ginsberg qtd. in Hadda 240)

The vision Ginsberg refers to in this diary entry is his hallucination of the voice of William Blake's Ancient of Days (Isaacs). At least in his later life, Ginsberg was able to identify this as a transient hallucination, typical of the brief, stress-related psychotic symptoms in borderline personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association). Although the Blake hallucination was a symptom of a psychiatric disorder, Ginsberg found deep meaning in the hallucination, since this was what propelled him to become a poet (Isaacs). This diary entry is a hopeful sign that Ginsberg would be able to unify the elements of his mental state, and maybe even use this unusual state of mostly-recovered, clinically stable borderline personality disorder to further feed his creative urges.

In the years leading up to his psychiatric hospitalization, Ginsberg felt another characteristic split in his identity. He swung from feeling he had the ability to become a

poetic genius to feeling that he was not as smart as the other members of the Beat Generation he met at Columbia, particularly Kerouac and Burroughs (Aronson). In light of his possible stupidity, he felt he had to keep quiet when other Beats were speaking and passively sit on the sidelines and listen and try to learn from his intellectual betters (Aronson). Given this context, it comes as no surprise that *Howl* was written purely as a private, therapeutic poem (Isaacs); it was never meant to be read publicly or published in book form. Yet, these multiple instances of psychiatric dysfunction, coupled with the newfound confidence Ginsberg discovered in his literary ability and in his sexuality, led to the creation of *Howl* (1955-1956) and its first public performance at the Six Gallery reading.

Howl and Other Poems (1956)

After leaving the Psychiatric Institute, Ginsberg met the man who would become his long-term lover, Peter Orlovsky, in 1954, and shortly after they declared a marriage vow to enter Heaven together (Aronson). Ginsberg still displayed the symptoms of borderline personality disorder, but he was beginning to use those symptoms for an arguably more honest and more positive direction in life. After being convinced by a psychiatrist in San Francisco to drop out of conventional life and pursue poetry as a calling and as a career (Hamlin), Ginsberg was finally freed to write *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). Given his mental state, pursuing a lifetime of conventional employment while writing poetry on the side, seemed a sure formula for failure. By encouraging Ginsberg to drop out of the mainstream, this psychiatrist enabled the production of many works of art, and allowed Ginsberg to channel his symptoms into the creation of unusual poetic forms still emulated today.

Ginsberg needed to embrace the fractures within his psyche in order to realize his full talent as a poet, which first became clear in *Howl and Other Poems*. In order to be able to write a poem like *Howl,* which frankly discussed the experiences of psychiatric patients and homosexual sex and eroticism, combined with drug use and the lives of the impoverished writers in the gritty, urban underside of New York City and northeastern New Jersey in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ginsberg needed to overcome his fear that he, like his mother, was destined for a complete disintegration of the psyche.

Towards the end of his life, Ginsberg considered the famous opening line of *Howl* to be an exaggeration of the condition the Beats found themselves in (Isaacs). In contrast to the very tightly controlled form and emotion in "Dakar Doldrums," the opening section of *Howl* is a free-form expression of the life of the Beat Generation, a long, multiple page scream, with only one period and multiple commas. The entire first section of *Howl* is one sentence—the only part of the poem Ginsberg read at the Six Gallery reading—and gives insight into Ginsberg's slowly healing psyche: "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 hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" (lines 1-3; Charters 62). In this opening excerpt, the reader is drawn into the highs of the Beat Generation, as seen through the lens of a mind with the propensity to experience exultant emotions. To a person with borderline personality disorder experiencing labile emotions, the world is on fire. At the same time, rapid switches between elation and dejection are also possible, so a person may enter a dysphoric state very quickly. Ginsberg's opening lines of *Howl*, until "angelheaded hipsters," shows the dysphoric

outlook of a person in his condition. The focus of the author is on psychiatric degradation and the resulting poverty and need for some degree of stimulation, whether through drugs, sex, crime, or art. Yet *Howl* was meant to be performed as a form of cathartic therapy for Ginsberg and possibly the audience; this was the case at the Six Gallery reading and later performances of *Howl* (Tytell 638).

While Section I of *Howl* took the reader on a journey through drugs, poverty, sex, exultation, hallucination, and dejection, Section II reflects the dysphoria and suicidality inherent in borderline personality disorder. Ginsberg personifies financial and bureaucratic institutions as Moloch, a god standing in opposition to all that the Beat Generation embodied. "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is run- / ning money!" (line 5; Charters 68). By presenting conventional society as Moloch, Ginsberg unites his readers against a common enemy. Until the middle lines of Section II, Moloch is an external enemy. There is a shift in the section once Ginsberg reveals the true nature of Moloch.

When the speakers states that "Moloch whose name is the Mind!" (line 8; Charters 68), Section II becomes both a condemnation of external influences and a realization that the enemy is within. Ginsberg, like many others, was entrapped by his psyche, and the last lines of this section take on an ominous tone: "They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! / to solitude!" Dysphoria and suicidiality are parts of borderline personality disorder and these lines read as an encouragement to escape from Moloch by suicide. If Moloch is inside all of us, then self-deliverance by suicide is the only option.

Section III of *Howl* is a mostly straightforward expression of solidarity between psychiatric patients that continues throughout the section. In part of the poem, there appears to be some dissociative or mildly hallucinogenic process (Gunderson 16-17), since the reader is left with the impression that these lines are about Ginsberg's desire for Cassady, already identified in Section I as "the secret hero of these poems" (Charters 65). Ginsberg concludes: "I'm with you in Rockland / in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the / highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage / in the Western night." This section conflates Carl Solomon, a fellow Psychiatric Institute patient, with Cassady, the partially obscured love interest. Ginsberg begins this stanza clearly describing solidarity with Solomon, and then transitions into language addressing desire for a lover. Additionally, the references to cross-country trips are consistent with Cassady's known propensity to travel across America.

"Footnote to *Howl*" begins where the hallucinations and dissociative, loose thinking ends; again, the poem escalates into a period of heightened religiosity, triggered by the dream of a lover that concludes Section III. This alteration in mood is consistent with borderline personality disorder (Goodwin and Jamison 108). Everything is "holy" to the speaker, including things that are typically thought of as disgusting, such as the penises of elderly men: "Holy my mother in the insane asylum! Holy the cocks of the grand- / fathers of Kansas!" (line 7; Charters 71). Following the layout of the poem on the page, progressing from the ending of Section III through the "Footnote," it seems clear that Ginsberg's recollections of Cassady were the trigger for this state of rapturous bliss. However, given the fact that *Howl* was written out of order, the actual trigger for this mood may impossible to determine.

In comparison to "Dakar Doldrums" (1947), more symptoms of Ginsberg's psychiatric disorder are apparent in *Howl*. Ginsberg is able to weave his symptoms into a poetic masterpiece, one that might never have been possible had he not experienced eight months of inpatient treatment. *Howl* elevates psychic distress to art, yet manages to still hide the desire for Cassady among the more liberated personal disclosures of hallucinations, sex, and risky behavior.

Literary scholars have also noted the importance of place to the Beat writers. In Ginsberg's case, escaping the memories and potential expectations he associated with a more formal East Coast culture (Sterritt 30) seemed to be essential to the creation of *Howl*. John Tytell, examining the effects of *Howl* sixty years after its publication, noted "'Howl' was written in San Francisco in 1955, when Ginsberg was twenty-nine years old" (636). The necessity of escaping to an authentic life in an unfamiliar part of the country or world seems like a requirement for Ginsberg's best literary work.

That critics have largely ignored Ginsberg's work prior to *Howl*, is made clear by a search through the Modern Language Association database that returned no results. Critical attention in the future should be directed towards these early poems, since they stand in such contrast with the literary and personal freedom evidenced in *Howl* and *Kaddish* (1958). Literary scholars can develop a fuller sense of Ginsberg's development as a poet by giving his early work the same level of critical attention as his most famous works.

Ginsberg's Later Life

Ginsberg reached a poetic peak with *Howl and Other Poems* and *Kaddish*. Although he remained active as a poet until a month before he died, Ginsberg the

"hippie's hippy" and public figure (Buckley, Jr.) eclipsed Ginsberg the poet, beginning in the 1960s. When appearing on *Firing Line*, Ginsberg's activism and public chanting of Hare Krishna and Buddhist mantras was more important than his poetry (Buckley, Jr.). Additional evidence that his poetic star began to wane considerably after the 1960s may be seen in the choice of poems included in anthologies of Beat poetry. When compiling *The Portable Beat Reader*, for example, Ann Charters chose to include works from *Howl and other Poems* and *Kaddish* as most representative of Ginsberg's importance to American poetry (62-101). Despite knowing that Ginsberg had remained a prolific poet throughout the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Charters chose only to include works from the 1960s in her section on Beat poets' "Later Work" (543-555). During the decades following the Gallery Six reading, Ginsberg earned recognition for art forms other than poetry. Most notably, perhaps, he became a celebrated photographer, having his first gallery show in the 1980s (Aronson). His poetry became secondary to his political work and his photographic documentation of major Beat figures at different stages of their lives.

Ginsberg's possible borderline personality disorder was never confirmed during his lifetime. Although his instability apparently contributed to his development as a poet, his ultimate diagnosis remains uncertain, due to the difficulties of separating symptoms of a disorder from the effects of illegal drugs.

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