

From Sartre to Mailer: Civilisational Nothingness, Commitment, and the
Immanence of the Here-and-Now in Ginsberg's 'Howl'

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Published in 1956, 'Howl' came out during a period that saw a rising interest in Existentialism in the Western world. Although Existentialist theory didn't start in the 1950s, it came back in favour as an effect of the tragic context of the first half of the 20th century. The extent of the destructive frenzy of the two world wars – the millions of deaths, the mass annihilation of a part of the humanity – demanded a reassessment of an elemental question, an axiomatic question that holds together the various tenets of Existentialist theory: what is being? In this sense, Existentialism, although regarded as a fashion, an attitude, a 'hip thing', was primarily an ontology.

In America, the presence of Existentialism in the post-war years had a double origin: it stemmed, partly, from the transcontinental movement of philosophy, which made Existentialism quite alluring to American scholars in particular. Surely, the most famous figure of European Existentialism was Jean-

Paul Sartre. In 1943, Sartre wrote *Being and Nothingness* ('L'être et le néant');¹ this work, largely inspired by Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), put forward the notion of commitment, envisaged as an ontological position that realises the utmost potentiality-for-being of an individual through a consummate engagement with each and every situation of the here-and-now. America, however, had also been producing its own sort of Existentialism, as George Cotkin suggests in his work *Existential America* (2003).² Cotkin demonstrates that an existential sensibility did exist in the American culture and literature, from the Puritans to Melville and the writers of the Lost Generation. While these writers pointed in different directions, their works were all consistently motivated by the primordial existentialist question: what is being?, the same question that Sartre and 20th century Existentialists relentlessly sought to answer in their works.

Therefore, this paper will tap into these two sources, indigenous and imported, which make up for an American type of Existentialism. I want to show that Ginsberg's 'Howl' may be read from an Existentialist perspective, through Sartre's notion of 'commitment' in particular; meanwhile, I also want to show the ways in which the poem produces its own brand of Existentialism: an Existentialism that is full of hope, madly spiritual, and quintessentially American.

I. Moloch as (civilisational) nothingness

In Part 2 of 'Howl', Ginsberg uses the mythical figure of Moloch as a predator: 'What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open their skulls and ate

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*

² George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

up their brains and imagination?’³ Ginsberg actualises the legendary figure, whose demands for human lives stand for a principle of destruction as well as purification. Moloch radiates a mortiferous energy that, crucially, enters the individual: ‘Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body!’:⁴ the existence and malevolence of Moloch is internalised by the poet. In these terms, Part 2 coincides with a principle of death ingrained in the consciousness of the agency of the poem, composed of Ginsberg himself and the community of the ‘angelheaded hipsters’.⁵

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that ‘consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being’.⁶ As we switch around the terms of Sartre’s definition, nothingness corresponds to a form of self-consciousness that reflects upon the negating capacity of the subject himself; that is, the potentiality for the subject to cease to be. As Davis Dunbar McElroy analyses in *Existentialism and Modern Literature*:

[W]ith every apprehension of being, man also apprehends the possibility or "threat" of non-being. [...] This threat of non-being puts man in a state of basal anxiety. Man is anxious because he is agonizingly aware of the threat of annihilation to his precious individuality, a threat from which there is no final and positive escape except death, the thing he most fears.⁷

³ Allen Ginsberg, ‘Howl’, in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems* [1956] (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p.8.

⁴ Ibid., p.9.

⁵ Ibid., p.1.

⁶ Sartre, p.70.

⁷ Davis Dunbar McElroy, *Existentialism and Modern Literature: An Essay in Existential Criticism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963), p.5.

That is to say, nothingness is a consciousness of death – of my own death. It is an attribute of being, and one of the modalities of human consciousness; a form of consciousness that stems from the intrinsic threat that the possibility of non-being poses to the self. Thus, through Moloch, Ginsberg suffuses the poem with a dramatic sense of danger that accommodates the awareness of the menace of imminent annihilation; this is how, in Existentialist terms, Moloch acts as a form of Sartrean nothingness in ‘Howl’. The poetics support the sense of anguish that is conveyed by Moloch. Ginsberg’s split of the long line is instrumental in this section: the smaller phrase units sound as if the narrator was choked by the awareness of the imminence of his own annihilation. they convey a sense of urgency, as if death was to strike on the next second and silence the poet forever.

Crucially, the depiction of Moloch echoes Blake’s mythology. In fact, Urizen is Moloch’s forefather, the embodiment of Reason; The Urizenic mentality, as the essence of abstraction, is precisely what mediates the experience of existence and abrogates subjectivity. From this perspective, Ginsberg’s Moloch may be replaced within the tradition of the Enlightenment that the Beats reprovved. For Moloch, devised as a mechanical, cannibalistic, ruthless and heartless metal machine monster, is an end-product of the excesses of rationalism: ‘Moloch whose name is the Mind!’⁸ In fact, Moloch constitutes the postwar horizon of American citizens. For McElroy:

⁸ ‘Howl’, p.9.

[T]he very thing which made individual freedom a possibility – the mechanization of the means of production, a competitive economic system, and democracy – has tended more and more to force man into that state of complete isolation which he fears so greatly. The result has been that modern man has become a cog in a vast machine, and he is made to work for inhuman ends. [...] The world he has built has become his master; the work of his own hands has become a god before whom he bows down.⁹

This god is a variant of Moloch; It echoes Shelley's *Frankenstein*: the monster, by means of its own intelligence, has emancipated from its creator; it threatens him in return.

Moloch, as a paragon of rationalisation, embodies contemporary forms of extreme materialistic greed; it becomes an extended metaphor for modern capitalism: 'Moloch whose blood is running money!'.¹⁰ Ginsberg references the productive apparatus of the post-war industry ('Moloch whose mind is pure machinery', 'Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo');¹¹ he vituperates the cynicism of the materialist ethos: 'Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone, Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks'.¹² As he evokes the military-industrial complex ('Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!'),¹³ Ginsberg foresees a tragic end to Western civilisation. Hence, by means of a rhetorical device of

⁹ McElroy, p.8.

¹⁰ 'Howl', p.8.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p.9.

¹³ Ibid., p.8.

personification, Moloch finds a reflection in the very environment of modern America, as the new skyscrapers replace the ancient gods. This is how Ginsberg turns Part 2 of 'Howl' into a diatribe that lists many of the social evils of post-war America; simultaneously, he castigates the foundational values of modernity that underpin the deleterious cultural project that Moloch propagates.

From an Existentialist perspective, a shift operates from the paradigm of *being* to the one of *having*, as Moloch encapsulates a process of materialistic totalisation that emasculates ontological possibilities. In other terms, modern man's chances for authentic ways of being – that is, the possibility for an individual to realise his or her ownmost potentialities-for-being at any instant – are considerably undermined by the conditions of post-war existence. As we have seen, the cultural context that Moloch epitomises crushes subjectivities. It is this threat of ontological dissolution embedded in the project of modern civilisation that Ginsberg illustrates through the anthropophagous character of Moloch. Therefore, Moloch may be envisaged as a cultural principle of death that grounds the civilisational nothingness in Western consciousness in general, and in Ginsberg's characters in particular.

II. Sartrean forms of commitment in the poem

The ontological problem that Ginsberg's heroes face in 'Howl' – namely, their individual and historical consciousness of non-being under the reign of Moloch – must be read within the wider context of the poem. Its different parts make sense in relation to the tradition of the epic: the Moloch section is but a sequence in the poem that corresponds to an ordeal; it is a monster that, as an

embodiment of a cultural principle of nothingness, needs to be defeated. For Richard Gray in *American Poetry of the 20th Century*:

[T]he strategy [of the great American epics] would be to create a hero rather than celebrate one and to make rather than record the history that surrounds him. They would, in effect, jettison the third-person hero of traditional epic [...]; and in his place they would put the poet himself as a representative, democratic man who discovers his identity and values in the course of writing, on his own and on our behalf.¹⁴

In other terms, the notion of epic heroism is essentially performative. What Gray suggests is that the very form of the American epic produces a framework for the poet-hero to *commit*; to engage with his concomitant reality, be it real or mythical: it records his own responses to his immediate environment, which, in turn, define his identity, or the identity of the agency.

This is precisely what Ginsberg does throughout Part 1: syntactically, this part may be read as an accumulation of processes that corresponds to a strategy to balance out the emasculating powers of Moloch. In Existentialist terms, these actions epitomise a form of commitment, a liberatory movement against the threat of annihilation; a reaction against nothingness. As Naomi Zack explains:

At any rate, there is an existential return to the here and now after the realization of death's inevitability and readiness, which, assuming that one

¹⁴ Richard Gray, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1990), p.13.

does nothing except wait for death, would seem to entail a fresh commitment to one's life, or a realignment of one's fundamental attitude towards one's life.¹⁵

For Sartre, commitment corresponds to a forceful engagement of the subject with the here-and-now; while this engagement is, primarily, phenomenological, its implications are both ontological and historical. The Beat passion for movement, for spontaneity and their emphasis on the possibilities that each instant brings for the self channels Sartre's definition of commitment; the expression of an obsessive desire to maximise the alignment of one's own being with the situations of every moment is an Existentialist manifesto in itself, an experimental search for the highest form of authenticity that one could achieve on a daily basis, fighting norms, conditioning and contingencies all at once. For Erik Mortenson in *Capturing the Beat Moment*:

'[...] it is clear that existentialism played a role in Beat thinking, both as a direct influence and as a cultural backdrop that helped to develop Beat thinking along certain lines. More important than influence is that the Beats and the existentialists were bringing their thought to bear on the problem of breaking through mediation and inauthenticity to encounter the world directly.¹⁶

¹⁵ Naomi Zack, 'Race, Life, Death, Identity, and Good Faith', in *Existence in Black*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.103.

¹⁶ Erik Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), p.27.

As Ginsberg's heroic agency embarks on an odyssey that seeks to defeat the forces of oppression apprehended culturally, they build, reciprocally, the heroic contents of their own existence: 'the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years'.¹⁷ As Sartre argued in his 1946 essay 'Existentialism & Humanism' ('L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme'): 'Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is'.¹⁸

In typical Sartrean fashion, Ginsberg's heroes, as they commit to the here-and-now, exemplify their own set of values; in return, these values define their identity. In Part 3, the narrator expresses his affection for his friend and lover Carl Solomon, who is interned in Rockland. Rockland is depicted as an institution that attempts to rationalise the condition of being: it corresponds, in fact, to one of the agencies of Moloch. Through the anaphora 'I'm with you in Rockland', Ginsberg epitomises values of love and compassion.¹⁹ Ontologically, as Ginsberg's being accompanies and eventually amalgamates with Carl Solomon's, the anaphora of the Rockland section corresponds to a type of commitment that accommodates the ethical imperative of Sartrean engagement: since, for Sartre, 'my action is [...] a commitment on behalf of all mankind',²⁰ then this section endows the agency of the poem with a sense of social responsibility; it provides its heroic engagement with an ethical frame that is both deeply subjective and self-creative.

¹⁷ 'Howl', p.8.

¹⁸ Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism' [1946], trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 2007), p.48.

¹⁹ 'Howl', p.10.

²⁰ Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p.32.

III. Spiritual Existentialism: Towards an American variant of Existentialism

Nevertheless, 'Howl' is plagued with references to the divine, which, from an Existentialist perspective, are problematic in terms of the autonomy of the self. In Part 1, the characters are craving for the transcendent. In typical Blakean fashion, Ginsberg uses an interplay on light for that purpose: 'burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo',²¹ the 'brilliant eyes',²² 'gleamed in supernatural ecstasy',²³ in the climactic Part 4, about everything has become holy. While these references tally with the Prophetic tradition of Ginsberg's poetry, they clearly conflict with Sartre's Existentialist theory: for Sartre, the concept of the divine is a facticity that keeps one from becoming an entirely autonomous subject; it is a mark of inauthenticity. As he writes in 'Existentialism & Humanism':

Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's actions by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom.²⁴

²¹ 'Howl', p.1.

²² Ibid., p.2.

²³ Ibid., p.3.

²⁴ Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', pp.37-38.

Norman Mailer, in his 1957 essay 'The White Negro', attempted to reconcile these two positions.²⁵ In his essay, Mailer qualifies 'hipsters', a sociological segment of post-war America that shares many similarities with Ginsberg's characters, as existentialists. For hipsters, movement is essential: it seeks to realise 'what one feels at each instant in the perpetual climax of the present'.²⁶ This movement, in fact, may be read as a form of Sartrean commitment against the cultural nothingness that the 'Squares' embody – the other conservative segment of post-war America that is happy with the status quo, and secretly ruled by Moloch. The 'hipster's' dedication to movement is qualified ontologically by Mailer through the phrase 'being-with-it':

To 'be with it' is to have grace, is to be closer to the secrets of that unconscious life which will nourish you if you can hear it, for you are then nearer to that God which every hipster believes is located in the senses of his body, that [...] God who is It, who is energy, life, sex, force, the Yoga's prana, the Reichian's orgone, Lawrence's 'blood', Hemingway's 'good', the Shavian life-force; 'It'; God; not the God of the churches but the unachievable whisper of mystery within the sex, the paradise of limitless energy and perception just beyond the next wave of the next orgasm.²⁷

²⁵ Mailer, 'The White Negro' [1957], in Ann Charters, *The Penguin Book of the Beats* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp.582-605.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.600.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.597-98.

As Mailer relocates God within the senses of the body and equates it with ‘energy, life, sex, force, etc’,²⁸ he encapsulates the divine principle into the very movements of the subject. Here, the divine principle is not apprehended as an external, omnipotent or morally determined godhead; rather, it is perceived as engrained within the individual: it corresponds to a form of immanence, which is the conception of the divine principle located within the self. This theological conception in American poetry stems from the traditions of 18th century Romanticism and 19th century American Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalists such as Charles Mayo Ellis and Ralph Waldo Emerson envisaged all subjects and objects as penetrated by the grace of God. As Ellis wrote in his 1842 essay on Transcendentalism: ‘[Transcendentalism] asserts the continual presence of God in all his works, spirit as well as matter; makes religion the natural impulse of every breast; [...] God’s voice in every heart’.²⁹ Such a pantheistic conception of the divine implies a form of immanence (‘God’s voice in every heart’).³⁰ This formulation of divinity as immanent is acknowledged by Mailer as well, for whom ‘God was in the slime from the beginning’.³¹ In the last part of ‘Howl’, where ‘Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy!’,³² the divine penetrates the here-and-now as well as man himself: ‘The nose is holy! The skin is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!’.³³ Indeed for Transcendentalists, humankind, as an emanation of divinity, partakes

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Charles Mayo Ellis, ‘An Essay on Transcendentalism’, in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Perry Miller (New York: Doubleday, 1957), pp.21-35 (p.27).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Norman Mailer, *On God*, ed. by Michael Lennon (London: Continuum, 2008), p.35.

³² ‘Howl’, p.12.

³³ Ibid.

in holiness, as Ginsberg's 'footnote to 'Howl'' illustrates quite literally:

'Everyman's an angel!'.³⁴ Following on from Whitman, Ginsberg suggested that 'individuals should be encouraged to explore the divinity within themselves'.³⁵

This immanent dimension implies that, in 'Howl', the characters, by means of their passion for movement, actualise themselves as well as God, whose divine grace is exemplified through their own commitment. Therefore, as immanence renders the divine concomitant with being, the restless engagement of Ginsberg's heroes against Moloch may be envisaged as a live performance of the divine. Ontologically, this immanent form of being may be qualified as a form of spiritual commitment that exemplifies a 'being-unto-God'. Through such a form of 'being-unto-God', the responsibility to act, and thus enact the holy essence, remains with the individual. As a consequence, man, ultimately, is autonomous. According to Mailer: 'I've been saying all along, God does not control our destiny'.³⁶ It implies that man *has a choice* to act or not to act at every instant, that is, in Sartrean terms, to be or not be. In this sense, this 'being-unto-God', as a form of authenticity in Ginsberg's poem, is not incompatible with Sartre's humanistic approach.

It entails that 'Howl's duty for historical liberation is, in essence, spiritual: this is how the references to the divine qualify both the nature and finality of the commitment performed by Ginsberg's characters in the poem. Crucially, the ontological formulation of a being-unto-God in 'Howl' emanates

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Allen Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995* – Allen Ginsberg, ed. by Bill Morgan (London: Penguin, 2000), p.173.

³⁶ Mailer, *On God*, p.60.

from a form of Existentialism that collapses temporality: it accommodates an immanent definition of the divine that abrogates the projection in an afterlife and replaces it with a liminal experience of the here-and-now made timeless, hereby revealing at every instant the divine grace of one's being. This American variant of Sartrean Existentialism encapsulates the supreme paradox of an authentic and autonomous commitment to the here-and-now through which the ubiquity, the magnanimity and the potency of the divine principle is simultaneously realised.

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