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Prof. Cermatori

"Wake up in Moloch:"
Modernity, "Howl," and the Beats' Spiritual Quest

Modernity has brought with it immense, drastic, and wide reaching changes in Western ethics. Our ethics of world, of self, and of myth have all been transformed over the course of the past four hundred years such that our actual experience of being in the world differs dramatically from that of the pre-modern individual. Specifically, the rise of secularism has annihilated the spirituality that was universal in the pre-modern world. In the midst of 20th century America, the Beat Generation emerged as a challenge to the ethical assumptions and underpinnings of modernity, and argued instead for a different way of being—attempting to return to a spiritual understanding of the world. They followed the literary lineage of the Romantic poets, but more prominently of Walt Whitman and the American Transcendentalists. By the time of the Beats, Existential philosophy had been developing over the course of a hundred of years in Europe, ranging from the early existential theology of Kierkegaard to the 20th century atheistic existentialism of Sartre and De Beauvoir. Similar to that critical literary movement described above, many Existentialists, (and proto-existentialists), recognized an inherent issue in the ethics of the modern individual. Nietzsche, as early as the 19th century, critiqued a burgeoning "European nihilism" (Nietzsche 110). Considering the Beats vis-à-vis existentialism reveals that

the aesthetic and ethical motive of the beats was an inherently existential one, concerned with the impossibility of a spiritual understanding of the world in their modernity.

The Beats were struck by the difference between Whitman's spiritual vision of America and their own. That difference, combined with the Sartrean idea that *a priori* values do not exist, went against their intense desire for spiritual meaning. Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" presents the Beat solution to this apparent paradox. They reject the Sartrean acceptance of a non-spiritual world, and a secular, restrictive modernity. They turn instead to the uniquely Beat idea of a spiritual quest—pof moving towards a spiritualism denied to them by modernity. What the Beat spiritual quest represents, is not an exact replication of Whitmanian spirituality or Kierkegaardian faith, but distinctly modern transcendence that critiques and revolts against their 20th century American modernity. The quest is never-ending; there is no destination for the Beat journey. It is their search for faith that becomes a faith of its own—one developed directly in response to modernity.

The Beats and the Whitmanian Vision

Ginsberg's "Howl" is an iconic work for the Beat Generation, one that is simultaneously a self-reflective meditation on the Beat movement itself as well as a critique of the American modernity that spawned that generation. The poem makes clear that both Ginsberg and the broader Beat movement were writing and living in the same rebellious, ethical tradition of the Transcendentalists and Romantics. Ginsberg himself made this explicit in a 1997 interview done 14 months before his death, saying "I'd like to be remembered as someone who advanced the notion of compassion in open heart, open form poetry, continuing the tradition of Whitman and Williams" (Pacernick 249). In 1948 Ginsberg experienced an auditory hallucination, hearing the

voice of William Blake. This "Blake vision" would become a profound moment in Ginsberg's personal mythos, one that informed both his poetry and spirituality throughout his life.

Through these moments, we see that Ginsberg's attachment to that older artistic lineage is explicit and conscious. His use of free verse, or open form poetry, is often reminiscent of Whitman's style in many ways. In the first section of "Howl," for example, Ginsberg begins almost every line with the pronoun "who," repeating the same structure over and over again while describing the various trials and tragedies of the Beat Generation:

> "who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy,
>
> who jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on the impulse of winter midnight
>
> streetlight smalltown rain..." (Howl 26-27)

Ginsberg repeats this structure continuously, until one begins to feel that somehow he is in fact transcribing the doings of an entire "generation." The structure seems to echo section 15 from Whitman's opus "Song of Myself," published in *Leaves of Grass*. Section 15 consists of a similar anaphoric structure, each stanza containing a subject and action:

> The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
>
> The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
>
> The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel... (Whitman 269-271)

And on, and on. Whitman's effect is similar—a sense of grand scale is invoked. Simultaneously, that scale is restricted to being specifically American through references like "Thanksgiving dinner" (Whitman 266), "the Huron" (Whitman 289), and "the clean-hair'd Yankee girl" (Whitman 295). While to claim a direct reference between these two sections would be a stretch,

the similarities show how Ginsberg is, like Whitman, concerned with representing a varied whole, connecting diverse experiences into a single image of a larger group and idea. For Whitman, that idea is a celebratory picture of America, as Whitman sees it. ("The young fellow drives the express-wagon, I love him, though I do not know him" (Whitman 281). For Ginsberg, that idea is of a group of people grappling with and living within modernity: "the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" (Howl 1).

In "A Supermarket in California," Ginsberg speaks directly to Whitman, imagining the two of them walking through a supermarket at night. Ginsberg is somewhat in awe of Whitman, and asks rhetorical questions. Ginsberg describes hallucinating Whitman, and addresses him directly: "I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective" (Ginsberg 12-13). Ginsberg also points to their shared queerness when he describes his imagined Whitman "eyeing the grocery boys" (Ginsberg 11). Key to the poem, however, is not their similarities but the sense of difference between Whitman's America and Ginsberg's. Whitman's anachronistic presence is accentuated by the references to the modern supermarket, with its "brilliant stacks of cans," "refrigerator," and frozen foods. The technology of modern consumerism makes Whitman's presence all the more absurd. "Where are we going?" Ginsberg asks. The America that Whitman lived in and celebrated seems to be gone, leaving the two drifting, unsure:

> Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?
>
> Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have...? (Ginsberg 23-25)

Ginsberg mourns Whitman's "lost America," not as something that came and went, but as something no longer even imaginable. Certainly, the reality of Whitman's America, with its slavery, brewing antebellum tension, and puritan repression, was not the transcendental utopia Whitman invoked in his poetry. What makes it truly lost, for Ginsberg, is actually a complete inability to envision such a world when confronted with the America of 20th century modernity.

In Andrew Vogel's " The Dream and the Dystopia: Bathetic Humor, the Beats, and Walt Whitman's Idealism," he identifies and explores this strange relationship between the Beats and Whitman's ideal America. He describes the Beats as aware of the huge distance between Whitman's democratic pseudo-utopia and the realities of the Cold War era United States they inhabited. Vogel claims that the Beats faced this discrepancy with a degree of sorrowful humor, as well as a use of bathos, which Vogel defines as "the laughable result of straining for a sublime ideal but tripping over hard reality into the absurd" (Vogel, 389). This is perfectly represented in "A Supermarket in California," where comical images of Whitman "strolling" (Ginsberg 10) among the aisles superimpose a mournful acknowledgement that America has strayed so far from Whitman's vision.

The Beats and French Existentialism

The Beats, then, represent a philosophical outlook that is distinctly concerned with a certain existential lack; confined within the harsh reality of their real historical context, they are unable to experience the spiritual fulfillment they truly need. Whitman's visions of democracy, the self, and the American future are all extremely spiritual, imbued with Whitman's transcendental meaning. The contrast between the desire for that Whitmanian world, and the reality of their modernity, informed the Beat generation's project, both in their art and in their

lifestyle. The existential outlook, as defined by influential philosophers such as Sartre and Camus, is the same thing: a grappling with the absence of inherent spiritual or transcendent meaning.

While Ginsberg never discussed any direct engagement with Sartre, Camus, or other Existentialists, the connection between those French philosophers and the Beats has been explored and noticed by many – even some Beats themselves. Particularly, it is the so-called "quiet Beat," John Clellon Holmes who makes this relationship clear as early as in his 1952 article in *The New York Times*, "This is the Beat Generation." It was the article that first popularized the label, and Holmes directly references the Existentialist connection:

> [The Beat Generation's] own lust for freedom, and their ability to live at a pace that kills, to which war had adjusted them, lead to black markets, bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, hucksterism and Jean-Paul Sartre. The Beatness set in later. (Holmes 10)

Holmes presents his generation's interest in Sartre as a direct consequence of the trauma of World War II. This is a recurrent theme in the article, as Holmes frequently compares his own "Beat Generation," to the "Lost Generation," those that survived World War I. By Holmes' reckoning, that older generation was a distinctly nihilist one, "caught up in the romance of disillusionment," whose response to the horror of the Great War was a surrendering to the meaninglessness and pain of existence. The Beat Generation, by contrast, take those facts of life "frighteningly for granted." Instead of capitulating to the loss of God and meaning, the Beats possess a "will to believe, even in the face of an inability to do so in conventional terms." Holmes claims that Bazarov, the interminable nihilist of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, would be the literary hero of the Lost Generation. On the other hand, the Beat's hero is Stavrogin from Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*. While Stavrogin is similarly nihilist in some ways, Holmes

defines key but subtle differences: “For Stavrogin, behind a facade very much like Bazarov’s, is possessed by a passion for faith, almost any faith. His very atheism, at its extreme, is metaphysical.” Holmes ends the article by framing the Beat Generation as almost on quest: a quest for meaning, for something transcendent, for their own God. For they, more so than even the Lost Generation, recognize “that the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem.” Holmes' introduction to the Beat mission reframes their famous associations with drug use and Eastern religions through a markedly existential and spiritual lens.

Holmes’ reckoning of the Beats echoes Camus’ notion of the absurd universe. For Camus, the central paradox of the human condition is our need for external, transcendent meaning in a world devoid of any such available meaning. In his words, “[man] feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 613). Camus’ image of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a heavy stone up a hill for eternity, never to complete his task, could be swapped out for the down and out Beat, hurling themself into a new drug experience, a new spontaneous road trip, a new jazz club, all in search of something intangible, unobtainable. It is that striving effort that defines the Beats, the same effort that defines Sisyphus. Camus concludes his “Myth of Sisyphus” with the line “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.” Were the Beats happy?

This is the existential background for Ginsberg’s *Howl.* While Holmes presents the Beats as an almost spiritual project, especially compared to the spiritual void of the Lost Generation, *Howl* brings the actual experience of the Beats’ lives into the foreground. These lives, as Ginsberg evokes in repetitive stanzas, are frequently full of horror and grief – “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,” the poem begins. He describes those “best

minds" as a poetic echo of Holmes' article: "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" (Ginsberg 3). Ginsberg goes on to describe in great detail the various spirit-seeking efforts of this collection of "angelheaded hipsters."

The various lines describe many of the themes and escapades the Beat Generation became associated with. However, with the Holmes article in mind and following the "angelheaded hipsters" line, it becomes possible to read all these lines as expressions of that search for spiritual meaning and transcendence. The Beats' famous experimentation with and recreational use of drugs comes up here, with references to marijuana, opium, alcohol, tobacco, and more. Ginsberg himself stated that at least part of the poem was influenced by an experience he had after ingesting the psychoactive cactus peyote. The Beats' drug use, within the context of the Holmes article, cannot be read as merely hedonistic (though many Beats had various drug addictions). Their use of drugs was instead just one avenue at seeking that "ancient heavenly connection." This is confirmed in other Beat writings on drugs, such as Kerouac's description of his drug experiences in *On the Road*.

In addition, this section evokes a sense of desperation. That desperation manifests itself both physically and mentally, as in the line "[they] who drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity" (Ginsberg 60). The idea of distance is a common theme in Beat writing, with their famous affinity for road trips and hitch-hiking. But here Ginsberg shows that even upon reaching their destination, the spiritual experiences they search for are not always apparent. This is because it is not a physical distance that separates the Beats and transcendent meaning. Ginsberg dedicates as much time to the human costs of this endless searching as to the act of searching itself. He associates some of

this searching with a self-destructive counterpart, for example in the line "who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night/with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares..." (Ginsberg 10-11). This, combined with later lines about those "who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully," (55) and "who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge," (57) and "who created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson" (46) all give the impression that the Beat mission is, at least sometimes, a self-destructive one.

This returns to the meaning of "Beat" itself. While the term itself has uncertain roots, possibly coming from Kerouac, Holmes defines it as

> more than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness (Holmes 10).

While general mainstream culture viewed the Beats fairly generally as lazy, carefree bums, Holmes shows how the Beats actual commonality was a certain, almost depressive, feeling of emptiness. It is that shared emptiness, the shared acknowledgement of a spiritual void, that informed the Beats relationship to Whitman and his idealism. His poetry represented exactly the world that they did not perceive, but needed so desperately.

The Beat Vision of Modernity

What has led to this Beat generation? "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?" Ginsberg asks in the first line of the second stanza of *Howl*. Moloch, he answers. With this invocation of a biblical war-figure, Ginsberg critiques the culture and circumstance that has bred the Beat Generation. He does not

easily clarify what Moloch is, or what he represents; rather, he leaves Moloch open – a vague, apocalyptic, ominous amalgamation of the negative forces Ginsberg saw in his world. Moloch is simultaneously capitalism ("ashcans and unobtainable dollars"), "the vast stone of war," machinery, and nations (Ginsberg 80-82). Ginsberg announces Moloch as distinctly modern, associating him with industrialized America: "Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities!" (64) But along with the physical, tangible facets of "Moloch," Ginsberg also imbues a spiritual as well as emotional significance to the figure. Moloch has an isolating quality, separating Ginsberg not only from others but his body itself. Ginsberg implies the loss of spirituality has a self-alienating effect. Not stopping there, Moloch has also rendered the world material, annihilating external meaning and spirituality:

> Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!
> Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!
> (Ginsberg 90-91)

Ginsberg recognizes the spiritual, ethical dilemma of modernity, and that is a key element of his Moloch. It is Moloch that has left those angelheaded hipsters searching for transcendent meaning, and therefore Moloch who has made this generation what it is.

Moloch is an ancient Canaanite god featured in the bible, who is closely associated with child sacrifice. In "Howl," Ginsberg's Moloch demands different sacrifices. For one, those visions, omens, hallucinations, religions, etc., have to go. Those subjective experiences of external meaning are not permitted in modernity's post-Enlightenment rationalism and secularism. But at the same time, the Moloch figure represents the more tangible structures of industrialization and the growing American Empire. Moloch runs on American lives, including

those of the Beat Generation (many of whom, including Ginsberg and Kerouac, served in the U.S. Merchant Marine). It runs on "machinery" and "armies," its "blood is running money" (Ginsberg 83). Moloch invokes the name of progress, and no cost is too great for its advancement. Marshall Berman, in his 1982 analysis of modernity and modernism titled *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, describes how his first response to Moloch was thinking of Robert Moses, the infamous giant of American urban development. Moses' creation of the Cross-Bronx Expressway in Berman's home borough of New York City disrupted the lives of thousands, and caused permanent damage to the neighborhoods it went through. To Berman, Moses is the embodiment of that nihilistic impulse of modernity, the one that preaches progress and ignores human cost.

Berman's book analyzes the twisting and turbulent relationship between modernism and modernity. He describes various phases of modernism and its relation to modernity: while those "nineteenth-century thinkers were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life... their twentieth-century successors lurched far more toward rigid polarities and flat totalizations" (Berman 24). Berman sees in 19th century modernists an nuanced stance on modernity, one that recognizes its flaws but imagines an optimistic future. For many 20th century thinkers, that possibility seemed eradicated, and modernity became "a cage," where "all the people in it are shaped by its bars" (Berman 27). We see this play out quite clearly in Ginsberg's Moloch section, where Moloch is "the incomprehensible prison," or "the crossbone soulless jailhouse" (Ginsberg 82). The effect of that imprisonment, for Ginsberg, is isolation and an unsatisfied (or rather, denied) spirituality: "Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels!" (Ginsberg 86). Berman's analysis matches perfectly with the relation between Ginsberg and Whitman (a 19th century thinker himself). Whitman does not exclude the modern – he celebrates

the urban, the mechanical, and other facets of his industrializing America along with the spiritual self in his "Song of Myself." Ginsberg's depiction of modernity, in Moloch, is much more cynical; the spiritual is completely at odds with and impossible within that "incomprehensible prison."

Ultimately, Berman's critique of Ginsberg, "Howl," and others of that similar 20th century modernist malaise, is that they fail to "generate affirmative visions of alternate modern lives" (Berman 314). For this reason he makes the claim that Ginsberg in fact represents a desperate nihilism – one taken up as a response to and defense against the modern, secular nihilism represented by the Molochs and Moseses. To claim the Beat philosophy a nihilism is to go directly against the case made by Holmes in his *New York Times* article. Berman is right that "Howl" does not portray an alternate, affirmative modernity, but that is because the poem isn't at all trying to. "Howl," is instead about searching, reaching for something beyond the immanent destruction and violence of Moloch. It is not a desperate nihilism at all, but a desperate existentialism.

What sort of existentialism is it, then? Holmes initially aligns the Beats generation explicitly with Sartre. Coming out of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, it is believable that this generation could emerge cynical, or at the very least skeptical of the ideals, values, and beliefs that Sartre challenges with his athiestic existentialism. For Sartre, God does not exist, and therefore man "exists before he can be defined by any concept." (Sartre 345) We are, therefore, blank slates upon which we fashion our own concepts of who we are – "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre 345). Sartre recognizes this as an incredible pressure upon a person. If "God does not exist... all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him" (Sartre 349). This leads to a certain "anguish," Sartre explains,

a constant questioning of our own decisions and lifestyle. Sartre's existentialism does not quite match onto the Beat mission. The Beats do seem to accept the fact that traditional values are not some sort of preeminent ruleset; they were criticized routinely by more conservative readers of their time, with "Howl" going to court for its sexual and drug related "obscene" content. Sartre's anguish is not present in the poem, on the contrary, Ginsberg describes what is almost an intense *conviction*. There is no expression of doubt, or even regret, anywhere in the poem. Instead, we see those "angelheaded hipsters," in their quest for "ancient heavenly connection," hurl themselves (sometimes to their own destruction) into their lifestyle. In the last line of the first section, Ginsberg describes that common conviction shared by those "angelheaded hipsters," answering the rhetorical question, "how did they do all this?" It was "with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years" (Ginsberg 78). With that line, Ginsberg does away with Sartre's anguish. The existential woes of the Beats are of a different sort.

The Beats and Kierkegaardian Despair

It is Holmes himself who points the way. In 1958, six years after his *New York Times* article, Holmes wrote an essay for *Esquire* titled "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation." In the article, delivered a slightly enigmatic, and unelaborated, refutation of his earlier association with Sartre's existentialism. "To be beat," Holmes writes, "is to be at the bottom of your personality, looking up; to be existential in the Kierkegaard, rather than the Jean-Paul Sartre, sense." (Esquire) And so we turn from Sartre's staunchly atheistic existentialism to Kierkegaard's existential Christianity. In his book, *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard addresses his concept of *despair*, which is similar but not identical to Satre's "anguish." Despair, by Kierkegaard's

definition, is the titular "sickness unto death." It is a spiritual sickness, stemming from an imperfect relation to, or understanding of, one's self. Importantly, despair is a universal aspect of human existence, such that "no human being ever lived and no one lives outside of Christendom who has not despaired, and no one in Christendom if he is not a true Christian... still is to some extent in despair" (Kierkegaard 51). While everyone experiences despair, it can manifest in different forms, and emerge from various sources of discontent.

Kierkegaard sees the secular world as one possible source of despair, in that it causes an imbalance between the finitude of our existence and our spiritual infinitude. In an almost prophetic manner, Kierkegaard says

> As a matter of fact, in the world there is interest only in intellectual or esthetic limitation or in the indifferent (in which there is the greatest interest in the world), for the secular mentality is nothing more or less than the attribution of infinite worth to the indifferent. The secular view always clings tightly to the difference between man and man and naturally does not have any understanding of the one thing needful (for to have it is spirituality), and thus has no understanding of the reductionism and narrowness involved in having lost oneself, not by being volatilized in the infinite, but by being completely finitized, by becoming a number instead of a self, just one more man. (Kierkegaard 63)

Kierkegaard here traces how secularism, because it denies external spiritual value, ultimately isolates man in their own finitude. It is hard here to not to think of Ginsberg's Moloch, in whom Ginsberg "sits lonely." It is important to note, however, that while Ginsberg describes the loss of spirituality and transcendent value, Kierkegaard's notion of the self is more complicated than merely the concept of a soul. His "self" is a web of relations and personal dialectical tensions,

one of which is the tension between the infinitude of the God-given soul and the finitude of the body. Kierkegaard claims here that secular society favors finitude, and casts out infinitude as incompatible spirituality. Later on, he describes how the philistine-bourgeois mentality, with its focus on the trivial, the everyday, and the necessary, lacks the imagination for, and leaves no possibility of, God and therefore self (for the latter to be whole relies on the former). "The philistine-bourgeois," Kierkegaard says, "lives within a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible... in this way, the philistine-bourgeois has lost his self and God" (Kierkegaard 71). Both of these conditions, the philistine-bourgeois mentality and a completely secular world, result in despair for the individual.

The Beats' revolt against both of these elements of the modernity they inhabited is well documented and acknowledged. "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," Stephen Prothero's essay published in *The Harvard Theological Review*, posits the Beats as essentially a spiritual movement, responding to and revolting against the lifeless, secular psuedo-Christianity of their contemporary America." "The beats shared," writes Prothero, "not an identifiable geographical goal but an undefined commitment to a spiritual search. They aimed not to arrive but to travel and, in the process, to transform into sacred space every back alley through which they ambled and every tenement in which they lived" (Prothero 211). This comes across in "Howl" as well, where named, distinctly American places are frequently given cosmic significance: "[they] who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas" (Ginsberg 24). The poem is littered with places like "holy Bronx," "Baltimore" gleaming in "supernatural ecstasy," and the "heavens of Long Island" (Ginsberg 14, 26, 108). These all show Ginsberg's poetic and spiritual impulse to transform the secular American landscape into a holy land.

In a 1964 essay titled "Intellectual Rejections of Established Society: The Existentialists and the Beats," writer Gloria Murmis draws a pertinent parallel between the Beat rejection of "square" society and the existentialist (specifically Sartre and de Beauvoir's) rejection of bourgeois ethics. For both the Beats and the French existentialists, the normativeness of bourgeois society is an affront to and limiting for the moral freedom of the individual. As a result of their mantra that existence precedes essence, Sartre and de Beauvoir believe that "the only way to assert responsibility is by asserting one's freedom from established norms of behavior. To act according to an existing norm or pattern degrades action, giving it a mock justification, and deprives it of responsibility" (Murmis 62). The Beats, would agree, albeit perhaps using a different vernacular. Ginsberg subtly critiques bourgeois society within his Moloch section: "Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs!" (Ginsberg 88) Apartments and suburbs are both associated with the American bourgeois home. The "they" in "they broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven!" is also likely referring to the robotic bourgeois alluded to in the previous line. Ginsberg, similarly to Kierkegaard, associates that bourgeois complacency with the rise of the spiritless Moloch.

Holmes' quick philosophical adjustment, aligning the Beats with Kierkegaard specifically, begins to make more sense. But what does it mean for the Beats to be "at the bottom of [their] personality, looking up?" They may critique the same societal challenges to Kierkegaard's self, but that does not save them from his "despair." Later on in *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard lays out three distinct ways in which despair can exist. In the first, one is unconscious that they are in despair, because they are ignorant to their own spirit; they live mostly through sensual pleasures and a naive bliss. The second form of despair occurs when one is aware of their spirit, but strives to repress that awareness through a never-ending engagement

with their finite world and lives. The third form of despair occurs when one is keenly aware of their spirit, and their despair, and refuses to admit that existence beyond despair is possible. In Kierkegaard's words, "even if God in heaven and all the angels offered to help him out of [his despair] – no, he does not want that, now it is too late" (Kierkegaard 103).

The logical task would be to map out the Beats onto one of Kierkegaard's three forms of despair, but that proves not so simple. Kierkegaard himself admits that despair is a totally subjective experience, and to claim the nature of another's despair is almost fallacious. However, we can still make educated guesses through their art and expression, especially considering the Beats valued subjective self-expression as a guiding principle for their work (for example, consider Kerouac's interest in spontaneous prose). The third form, that which Kierkegaard calls "demonic" in its extremity, certainly can not define the Beats (Kierkegaard 104). Their receptiveness to new experiences, and their search for spiritual transcendence, prove their willingness and drive to overcome despair. The second form, that of the preoccupied consciousness and repressed self, seems like it belongs much more to the bourgeois "square" than the Beat. That leaves the first despair, the unconscious despair of those who live unaware of their spirit. Obviously, the Beats are extremely aware of their lacking spirit, so this seems an unlikely match. However, on close inspection, similarities are clear between Kierkegaard's first despair and the Beat lifestyle. Kierkegaard describes those who suffer this invisible despair as being "dominated by the sensate and the sensate-psychical" (Kierkegaard 73). They also tend to "lead a life very rich in esthetic enjoyment" (Kierkegaard 76). The Beats, with their reverence for sex, jazz, drugs, and the carnal experiences of life, certainly seem to fall into the category of the sensate. Their aesthetic impulse is also obviously apparent in their massive literary output. The distinction lies not in the lifestyle of the Beats, but in their acknowledgement of spirit. For

Kierkegaard's sufferer of unconscious despair "is too sensate to have the courage to venture out and to endure being in spirit" (Kierkegaard 73). The Beats are sensate in the very pursuit of spirit – they embrace the earthly precisely in response to their spiritual despair. Kierkegaard uses an analogy of a house to help describe his condition:

> Imagine a house with a basement, first floor, and second floor planned so that there is or is supposed to be a social distinction between the occupants according to floor. Now, if what it means to be a human being is compared with such a house, then all too regrettably the sad and ludicrous truth about the majority of people is that in their own house they prefer to live in the basement. Every human being is a psychical-physical synthesis intended to be spirit; this is the building, but he prefers to live in the basement, that is, in sensate categories. Moreover, he not only prefers to live in the basement—no, he loves it so much that he is indignant if anyone suggests that he move to the superb upper floor that stands vacant and at his disposal, for he is, after all, living in his own house. (Kierkegaard 73)

The Beat certainly partially resides in the basement of human experience, in the "sensate." But at the same time they desperately want to move up to the higher realms of human spiritual existence. In Holmes' terms, the Beats are "at the bottom... looking up" towards the spiritual and the transcendent. This seems almost paradoxical, at least by Kierkegaard's logic, but it is that inherent tension that lies at the core of "Beatness." By one definition, Beat means to be down and out, "more than weariness... the feeling of having been used, of being raw" (Holmes 10). But Kerouac instead insisted that "Beat" was instead a derivation of "beatitude" (Holmes). It stood for a celebration of the spiritual and the religious on a transcendent level.

This tension shows itself in “Howl” as well. In the Moloch section, Ginsberg mourns the nihilistic, secular world he inhabits while also embracing the spiritual that can transcend it: “Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!” (Ginsberg 87). Despite this, the Beats still despair. They despair that their modernity is so disparate from Whitman’s transcendental America. “Howl” is first and foremost a mournful eulogy to the “best minds of [Ginsberg’s] generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked” (Ginsberg 1). For Kierkegaard, the solution to despair is faith, and for him that means faith in specifically the Christian God, in the self and the self’s relation to God. How then can we understand the Beat despair when Ginsberg himself insists that “Howl is an affirmation, by individual experience, of God” (Johnston 166). God (not necessarily, and considering Ginsberg was a secular Jew turned Buddhist, likely not, the orthodox Christian God) is present in nearly every line of the first section of “Howl.” Every Beat action described in that section can be interpreted as a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, which Kierkegaard describes in his *Fear and Trembling* as the triumph of choosing one’s own relationship to God over the “universal,” or ethical. What else besides a zealous spirituality could prompt the diverse, mad collection of actions that fill the first section of “Howl?” If the Beats can be said to be faithful, it is a faith not to any specific God or religious creed, but to the very idea of faith itself—the spiritual quest itself is a fully religious vocation, demanding that Kierkegaardian leap.

The reason Kierkegaardian despair cannot map cleanly onto the Beats is a result of their historical contexts. Kierkegaard, writing towards the beginning of modernity, frames his world as one where people lie either within Christendom or outside of it. While he critiques the secular and bourgeois, there is no “Moloch” figure in his writing on despair. Despair comes about as an

internal process, determined by the self's relation to itself. It is an individual's subjective phenomenon, an experience closed off from that individual's actual life context. For the Beats, despair arises as a result of the incompatibility of their spiritual selves and modernity. Kierkegaard perhaps does not address the possibility of outside forces on internal despair because he did not imagine the extreme course that modernity would take – that his Christian God would be pronounced dead within a hundred years. A true, Kierkegaardian, faith is at the very least challenged by modernity's ubiquitous secularism and empiricism. The Beats represent a taking up of that challenge, a will to faith in spite of the "incomprehensible prison," Moloch.

The third and final section of "Howl" functions as an anthem of resistance. Ginsberg keeps up the repetitive, Whitmanesque form, but here the repeated mantra is the phrase "I'm with you in Rockland" (Ginsberg 94). The whole poem is dedicated to Carl Solomon, a writer Ginsberg met at the New York Psychiatric Institute, and who would later undergo electroshock therapy for his "madness." Ginsberg directly addresses Solomon, affirming that they are, in fact, together in Rockland, another psychiatric asylum. The meaning is twofold; Ginsberg both imagines his actual presence in Rockland with Solomon, but also uses Rockland as a microcosm of modernity itself, having described Moloch as an "invincible madhouse" in the previous section (Ginsberg 88). Carl Solomon, then, represents the archetypal Beat: at odds with the dominating system that restrains him. Solomon's outlook, like the Beats, is contradictory, experiencing a sense of spiritual loss while embracing the spiritual:

> "I'm with you in Rockland
>
> where you scream in a straightjacket that you're losing the actual pingpong of the abyss
>
> I'm with you in Rockland
>
> where you band on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die

ungodly in an armed madhouse" (Ginsberg 104-105).

The section reads almost like a prayer with its repetitive calls, and in the way Ginsberg is posturing, or pledging devotion to, an absent figure. The suffering Solomon faces is given holy significance through Ginsberg's spiritual language, as in the "fifty more shocks that will never return [his] soul to its body" (Ginsberg 106). With a deliberate reference to Jesus Christ on line 108, Ginsberg seems to posit Solomon as a 20th century martyr, persecuted by modernity's secularism.

Ginsberg's repeated calls of "I'm with you" evoke a sense of solidarity, and it is in that solidarity that we see the other meaning of the title, "Howl." It is a howl of despair, yes, of pain and loss, but also a rallying cry – a call to arms against the spiritual wasteland of modernity. The Beats are all martyrs, Ginsberg included. The suffering of the previous two sections is given new meaning. To be Beat is to suffer, but it is also to resist. A victory is imaginable, and in some ways, it is already present in the very act of resistance. In the second to last line of the poem, Ginsberg describes such a victory:

"I'm with you in Rockland

Where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own soul's airplanes roaring over the roof they've come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself   imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here   O victory forget your underwear we're free" (Ginsberg 111).

This is ultimately what differs the spirituality of the Beats from the spirituality of the early moderns like Kierkegaard and Whitman. They mourn the loss of Kierkegaardian faith and Whitmanian pantheism, sure, but what they represent is not a recreation of either. Their spirituality is one of resistance, one diametrically opposed to Moloch and modernity. They

exhibit a certain religiosity, but it is a faith in faith itself. While this could be interpreted as a second-hand, diluted pre-modern spirituality, it can also be seen more optimistically as an evolution of spirituality in response to modernity. It is more than a survival mechanism – even in their lowest moments, many of which are listed in “Howl,” the Beats thrive. They are certain that their path towards spiritual fulfilment is right, and that fact is fulfilling itself. That is why Jack Kerouac can write “No one can tell us that there is no God. We’ve passed through all forms. . . . Everything is fine, God exists, we know time. . . . Furthermore we know America, we’re at home. ... We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness. . . .” (Holmes) Or in Ginsberg’s “Howl”, the battle for spirituality is equated with the triumph of the spirit: immediately after announcing “the eternal war is here,” comes the cry “O victory.... We’re free.”

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