

Lies, Illusion, Fake Madness, Fake Art

Lies, illusion, fake madness, and fake art: that's what our poetics and art theorists have passed on to yet another generation. Exemplified, but by no means originating in Ginsberg's so-called epic, Howl, it is summarized quite neatly in the first line: "I have seen the best minds of my generation...." Reading these words, you can put the book down. Everything that follows is mere hysterics.

This line embodies four lies, and can thus be taken as a defining statement of the artistic and intellectual cul-de-sac we have long been caught in, like those stories of lost hikers we have all heard, who wander round and round in a rather narrow circle, entirely unaware that they are going nowhere and doing absolutely nothing to help themselves, in spite of all their effort.

In what follows, I lay out the four lies Ginsberg has reproduced so cleverly in his poem. I say "reproduced" because there's nothing new here. And I say "cleverly" because by all sales measures, this is one of the most successful poems ever published. Already a second generation is gobbling it up like so much fast food.

The first lie is on the literal level. It is quite obvious and direct. Ginsberg is not describing the best minds of his, or any generation. These are the failed and broken minds and souls of his generation. These are the rejected ones, who are rejecting the world (and themselves), as much as the world is rejecting them.

The truth is anathema to the four-tiered lie Ginsberg has built. The truth is that the best minds for many generations now have been disgusted by art and literature and its futile and impotent and nay-saying view of the world. The best minds have turned to science, math, and occasionally spiritual matters. The best minds have not given up on the world, but rather, are determined to rebuild it. They have left art and literature to wallow in its own drunken swill. With this line of Ginsberg's we get a good lungfull of the smell of modern literature. With catch-phrases like, "It's not the artist's job to create meaning; that's the job of the reader," we get another deep breath of the same vomit.

But this lie, about who the great ones are, is the necessary first step into the poetics of dissipation and futility.

The second misapprehension, one step below the surface, is the self-referential justification of the first lie. Here we learn from the fake prophet that the world is unredeemable, so much so that the only, or best, or at least the most "artistic"

response to these times is rejection and withdrawal. The world is too terrible and the sensitive soul (oh woe, oh woe) is crushed by it.

There are indeed many people crushed by the harshness of the world. Each of these people represents a great diminishment of what "could be." They are deserving (and demanding) of our help. They require an active response to bring healing, and are not to be silenced and shunted off in locked corners.

But, this is surely not the point of the poetics that guided Howl. The poet is not making a plea for more kindness. Nor is he guiding our steps through or around the morass of oppression, violence, and insensitivity that confronts us. Nor is he lamenting our ruin and loss. No! He is reveling in drunken and drugged-out disregard and disdain. His burning question to the reader is, "What is your drug of choice?" Those committed to dissipation and futility will smile and say, "Yes! That's the main question. Why not? What else is there?"

Yes indeed! Many people feel this way, and I have too, on occasion. But the fact that people think this is an honest response, and not merely honest but worthy of a whole poetics; this is what causes me to worry about our state of affairs.

And this fact takes us into the real inner workings of dishonesty and cynicism in this poem: the fable that has long equated inspiration with madness. This idea, articulated at least as long ago as German "Sturm and Drang" and found in English romanticism (although none of the romantics I've read were mad), became the calling card of dada and surrealism and their numerous offshoots. It is embedded in the popular mythologizing about the artist, in spite of the fact that one is hard-pressed to find meaningful examples. With a notable exception or two, like Nerval, the best we can do is point to some second-rate writers and local losers like Pound and Artaud and Plath. Ginsberg has simply summed up a long history of illusion and sloppy thinking. If we take Howl seriously we can only conclude that art and literature are degenerate, self-destructive activities, and that imagination and creativity are signs of disease, worthy of close medical monitoring at their first appearance. And yet this foolishness is the modus operandi of Howl, and a cornerstone of the poetic imagination of this century.

And from here we can finally confront the fourth level of dishonesty in this poem. The poem presents itself, and is intended to be seen, as the scribbings and desperate cry of just such a mad artist at the margin of sanity, or beyond. Because Ginsberg's readership is so primed by an absurd poetics that establishes madness as a qualifying necessity for artistic greatness, the minions bow down in awe. Here it is! The recovered writings of a mad prophet. But like faux marble, scratch the false

colors, even with a dull knife, and they flake off.

The poet is not mad and there is nothing honest about the perception of madness he creates. If indeed the world had defeated him, and this was his last half-sane cry, perhaps we could find meaning in his words, and surely we would feel empathy for his broken spirit. But the poet is not defeated. The facts of his life speak loudly and clearly to the contrary. Ginsberg was a fighter and talented self-promoter to the very end. No, this is a paean to self-indulgence, with cynical disregard for the truth

So why is Howl so popular? Although I believe I have laid out some partial answers already, frankly, I ask the question, not to seek an answer, but to expose the real question. What has gone wrong with our literary standards, that we have lost the desire for exemplary art? Why is not moral grandeur the defining feature of our literature?

There is only one way to answer these two questions, and that is to throw off this shabby, ill-fitting and confining garment we call 20th century literature. We need to once again take responsibility for our words and the words that we read and endorse. **Authors, not readers, are the creators of meaning.** And those authors that take responsibility for the value of their words, will also take responsibility for creating pathways into our future.

Where are those great ones that can imagine a way from here to a desirable future? We have plenty of piddlers who can rant on about the morass and despair they live in. Enough of lies and narcissism, cynicism and despair! If our intentions do not have a clear purpose and meaning, and if that purpose and meaning is not essentially ethical, then we're not ready to sit down and write. Paraphrasing the words of Frederick Turner in his introduction to The New World, "If we're not prepared to imagine a better future, how can we possibly create one?"

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