Communication and Argumentation in the Public Sphere **ISSN 1843 - 7893**
(2007) Year I Issue 3
Galati University Press
Editors: Anca Gâță & Adela Drăgan
Proceedings of the Conference *Public Space* vs *Private Space*, THIRD VOLUME
April 12th-14th, 2007 – "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galați Romania
pp. 464-469

Raluca ROGOVEANU

Allen Ginsberg: Private Rebellion and Public Dissent

Ovidius University, Constanta, ROMANIA
ralu_ionita@yahoo.com

Introduction

The cultural revolution of the Beat Generation was an attack on conservatism and conventionalism, a glorification of permanent adolescence which engendered a metamorphosis in social values, practices and attitudes, affecting not only the youth of the 1950s but also many generations to follow. The American youth mixed private hedonist attitudes and radical politics under the famous slogan "the personal is the political" and this sudden spread of adolescent passions brought about a restraint on adult virtues like respectability and responsibility. The Beat culture of the 1950s exhibited the motifs of teen, sexual and generational revolt that would command political prominence during the following decades. This countercultural movement, the authentic expression of youthful narcissistic hedonism, turned into an effective protest against the repressive cultural order. The efforts of the Beat artists to transform society were channeled into the artistic and moral life and indirectly, into the political realm. For many years to come, the children's revolution produced a deep-seated change in the American space which reverberated over decades. The newly emerged adolescent life-style set the pace for an entire society and proved that being young and groovy was highly desirable, and that portable radios, and guitar strains can successfully replace respectable conversations.

Sensing a paradoxical discrepancy between the increasing social affluence and the enhancement of collective expectations on the one hand and the shrinking of personal space together with the diminishing of individual possibilities on the other hand, the Beat artists attempted to recover the values lost in the gap between collective and individual, the public and the private.

Centered mainly in New York and San Francisco but indulging in geographical escapades across America, this counterculture started in the late 1940s but its influence extended deep in American culture until present times. Defined by social gatherings in cafes, clubs, galleries and parks, the Beat Generation developed a whole range of alternative practices which reflected the ideology of resistance. The alternative religious affinities and defiant life styles of the Beat artists annihilated cultural censorship and redefined media attacks by developing strategies of collective resistance.

The postwar American fiction attempted to identify and generate a new cultural space meant to celebrate the youthful energies and the subversive potential of the individual and the collective. Drawing on Emerson's ideal of the poet-prophet, mixed with the surrealist strategy of confounding art with life, tainted by the relativism of postmodernity at times, the Beats created a new receptacle of American values, a new philosophy of rebellion and acceptance. Key figures in the cultural politics of the mid 20th century, the Beats ensured the transition from the postwar avant-garde to the youth counterculture of the 1960s. Enriching the potential of American idealism

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with radical elements, the Beats inspired from the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau and from the visionary romanticism of William Blake while drawing on the existential tradition of Sartre and Camus, on surrealism and its illogical answer to questions concerning ontology and tradition. They proposed a new way of perceiving and experiencing the world and their cultural enterprise was a successful cognitive transformation which accompanied the partial institutional transformation of the industrial society. Public exposure enabled them to relay their message both in the realm of literature and beyond, in the political sphere.

1. Allen Ginsberg and anti-authoritarian discourse

A key figure of the Beat generation, Allen Ginsberg became a guarantor of America's anti-authoritarian discourse and a counterpoint to the repressive institutional mechanisms of the 1950s and 1960s. He reinterpreted transgressively the ideology of the 1950s, rejecting, yet appropriating it altogether. His poetics of subversion produced a new philosophy of culture, a new rhetoric of dissent and acceptance.

Ginsberg defines politics as a struggle between individuals and the institutions to which individuals are subjected. He considers that the quantity and quality of political ideas voiced in a text are indicative measurements of society's health, in the sense that a permissive and democratic political scene facilitates the existence of anti-mainstream hegemony discourses. Ginsberg's ideological strategy combined the personal with the political and his poetry took the form of authentic jeremiads of intimate experiences shared with the public. Recited in front of academic or lay audiences, his poems were authentic shows of ritualistic extraction.

The poet made his political debut in leftist groups and when entering Columbia University, he wanted to become a labor organizer and thus to continue the communist tradition of his mother and the socialist inclinations of his father. In Ginsberg's view, the mission of a politician is to shatter the emotional "bedrock of inertia and spiritual deadness that hangs over the cities" (Ginsberg 1970: 56). In his desire to abolish an oppressive political mechanism, Ginsberg imagines a type of society in which "people seize power over their universe and end the long dependence on an external authority or rhetorical sets of sociable emotions" (Ginsberg 2000: 112). The Communist affinities in Ginsberg's first writing period arise from utopian ideals of equality and welfare.

> I did have this desire to be labor leader people's hero […] that is, with my Jewish left wing atheist Russian background I even made a vow (not ever to be broken) on the ferryboat when I went to take entrance exam at Columbia, Vow Forever that if I succeeded in the scholarship test and got a chance I would never betray the Ideal – to help the masses in their misery. At the time I was very political and just recovering from Spanish Civil War which obsessed me in Jersey age 11 or 13.
>
> (Ginsberg, 1973: 54)

Ginsberg's going to Santiago Chile, to participate in a conference sponsored by the Communist party was an occasion for him to debate and ruminate upon political ideologies and conflicting ideas such as economic inequity, the Cuban revolution and Marxist principles. Deploring the sorrowful conditions of mankind, he pledges to "bring bread and love to the masses" (Ginsberg 1973: 131) through humanitarian poetry. However, his blunt honesty in declaring political convictions did not bring Ginsberg much political fame, since his political affinities clearly favored Fidel Castro's ideology rather than the U. S. position. The act of causing troubles with state organization seemed to be a constant aspect of his behavior throughout his life. Bold and straightforward when giving interviews abroad, Ginsberg paid little attention to the subtleties of a situation in the realm of external policy and commented with even less prudence about Cuban political decision. He complained

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about the persecution of the homosexuals by Lacra Social (official police troupes), urged that marijuana become legal and spoke in favor of the abolition of capital punishment. Somehow sensing that most if not all these issues were too delicate and controversial to be published in a newspaper, Ginsberg threatened that unless the material appeared, he would make sure that Jean Paul Sartre printed the material in France. However, his insistence on liberal matters and sexual politics was irrelevant in the context of Cuba's poverty, a country whose main interest lay in building schools, hospitals and strengthening a weak welfare system. As two reporters from *Hoy* declared:

> You must understand, the revolution is more concerned with basic issues like raising production, feeding and educating the people, cutting sugar and defending ourselves from US pressure. Later on, these aesthetic issues can be discussed
>
> (qtd in Miles 1989: 232)

2. Private Rebellion

During the conference in Cuba, the poet presented his views about methods to expand consciousness through drugs and waking fantasies, spontaneous writing on the rhythm of yoga meditation and mantra singing. His next conference on Walt Whitman was cancelled, yet he was politely explained that the Cuban revolution was about disseminating moral and ethical ideas and ensuring truth, bread and work to the young generation. Ignorant of the pressing social matters that asked for urgent solutions, completely naïve as far as diplomatic and tactful meetings were concerned, he might not have known that a slap on the back of a revolution heroine might permanently damage his reputation. Preferring the rebellious kids of El Puente poetic association to political figures like Castro, frivolous conversation to solid political problems, Ginsberg made his way out of Cuba in shame and acrimony. His nonchalance when discussing sexual matters, his successful attempt to seduce one of the El Puente youth, his comments on Raul Castro being a fairy good to possess in bed and his sexual fantasies with Che Guevara irreversibly transformed him into a person non-grata, an individual to dispose of and definitely not to confide in. In a traditional country with a "healthy" orientation, with an overwhelming majority of catholic faithful believers, such statements were unacceptable to say the least, if not completely outrageous and meant to bring about eternal public disgrace. The incompatibility between Ginsberg's trenchant discourses on homosexuality and the seriousness of political affairs overseas, their little relevance for the major problems that tormented East European countries made his lectures be met with a disapproving eye or labeled as samples of juvenile criminality. In his conversation with Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Russia's most famous poet in the 1960s, Ginsberg talked about homosexuality and narcotics, whereas the latter told him about the twenty million people arrested, killed or imprisoned during Stalin regime.

The first political demonstration in which Ginsberg ever participated was an anti-war campaign held outside San Francisco's Sheraton Palace Hotel. Carrying a placard with a printed poem on it, he marched along the street for fourteen hours, singing Indian mantras. Convinced that the hatred which consumed America, enraged ordinary men and led to the assassination of President Kennedy was to be cured only through prayers of universal love, Ginsberg started an offensive press campaigns in which he professed the ideology of universal tolerance and messianic love. Although his refusal to make racial distinctions or to advocate Israel's cause despite his Jewish ancestry did not ingratiate him either with his family or his relatives, it clearly consecrated him in the public opinion.

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3. Public Dissent

One of the constant elements of his public statements during his TV and radio interviews was his manifest antiwar position. Deploying his charismatic presence on TV and his skilful rhetoric, he harshly condemned America's invasive foreign policy and mentioned that its unscrupulous regulations damage the Government's reputation both at home and abroad. Trying to open a dialogue between political officials and the rest of America, Ginsberg attempted to set up a meeting between Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon's chief advisor on war strategies and David Dellinger the prominent leader of the peace movement, but his good intentions never reached any concrete result.

Ginsberg suspected political maneuvers when the release of the American hostages from Iran coincided with Ronald Regan's start of the presidential office. Having little confidence in "the Right Wing strong jawed movie star on the path of Supreme Power", he deplored the lavish manifestations of this event resembling either "Hollywood pomp" or "Mafia banquets" (Ginsberg 1974: 112). He incriminated both the U.S. and the USSR for the massive atrocities against mankind and his 1980s journals were records of violent and aggressive acts committed by these superpowers. He confessed that the desperate international situation paralyzed him into inaction and feared that US were unsuspectingly heading for another Vietnam, this time in Central America. Any poetry festival inside or outside the borders of the United States was an excellent opportunity for Ginsberg to voice his political ideology and express ideas of social discontent. In Managua, Nicaragua, Ginsberg assisted by Yevtushenko and the cardinal wrote an appeal for the liberty of Nicaragua. He also indicted US policy for having economically abused the country and for making it dependent on the Soviet Union.

In 1988, Ginsberg went to Israel and read poetry at a large demonstration in Tel Aviv while protesting against the treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories. His poem *Jaweh and Allah Battle* was hailed by sixty thousand marchers. During his short staying in Israel, Ginsberg compiled a dossier of information about censorship, which he handed to the PEN Freedom-to-Write committee. This successful feat resulted in the Israeli government being sent a letter "to cease its practice of censorship" and the Palestinian writers in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip found in the Jewish American association a reliable and protective forum. Israel was urged

> to end its policy of arrests of Palestinian and Jewish journalists, to reopen censored Palestinian newspapers, to reopen the Palestinian Press Service, and to cease its practice of censorship of books, school reading materials, newspapers and literary texts circulated in the West Bank and the Gaza Territories.
>
> (Ginsberg 2000: 79).

Back in New York, Ginsberg assumed an active position in asserting his Jewish identity. He started to attend weekly meetings with Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer, Roy Lichtenstein, Erica Jong, and Susan Sontag and together they decided to transmit their protest against Israel's treatment of Palestinians. A month later, the group expressed their solidarity with an association of Israeli artists who disavowed Israel's policy about the occupied West Bank. Ginsberg's strong position in the American cultural and political scene gave him flexible resources to tackle Israeli problems on the level of diplomatic international affairs. A member of the Freedom-to-Write Committee since 1966, Ginsberg used the support of his forum in various campaigns and LeRoi Jones, Timothy Leary, John Lennon were only a few artists to receive his help. Skillfully maneuvering his own position and harnessing the media power to his needs, Ginsberg managed to become an important figure for the Israeli cause in 1980s.

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Ginsberg's political ideas find their poetic expression in *Howl*, which was intended to be a counter-myth to American corporate liberalism, its bureaucratic system and excessively militaristic structure.It was also meant to be a prophetic poem, "calling on love and reality for salvation" (Schumacher 1992: 209). The imagery of the poem revolves around the canonized "angel-headed hipsters" who suffer "starving hysterical naked". Martyred by the Molochian regime, they refuse participation in political institution and favor a subversively spontaneous sense of natural community. Sacrificed in the process of abolishing Moloch, they rise "reincarnate" to establish final victory. By fighting Moloch, the "best minds" of Ginsberg's generation destroy capitalism ("running money"), industrialization and urbanization ("Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities"), excessive technologization ("Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone"), McCarthyian politics ("the congress of sorrows"), rigid religious systems ("who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy"), and the inescapable solitude as the sole condition of the individual ("Moloch in whom I sit lonely"). (Ginsberg 2001: 58-9)

Ginsberg professed the philosophy of the Poet-God for many years and, after having acknowledged that "the light is gone… the god is gone", he intended "to create a poetic world not depending on gods" (Ginsberg 2000: 74) The conflicts between nature and civilization, between self and a political society found an adequate solution with a mythical fulfillment. The process of mythogenesis accounted for the sacredness of the human spirit since he circumscribed personal experience to a mythic paradigm.

Final remarks

The value of the phenomenon called Allen Ginsberg lies in its setting the foundation of a matrix of complete cultural dissent and partial political activism. A new type of cultural pattern that calls into questions the public institutions and forums by changing the politics of common acceptance into a politics of personal involvement and nonviolence.

In between derision and critical seriousness, the reputation of the Beat Generation is still growing. The flourishing number of museums displaying Beat exhibits, publications on the life and literature of Beat members or Internet pages focusing on the lives of the Beat artists are living proofs to this tendency. Their artistic legacy outlived the Beat generation and they have become commodities of the popular imagination. Transformed into a fixture of pop culture, they represent the permanent challenge of confrontation between the past and the present, and although in a different form, their cultural energy, stored throughout generation, is still present.

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