

BEYOND REASON: ALLEN GINSBERG'S CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATIVE REVIVAL OF WILLIAM BLAKE

O Blake, Come help me now
The tears run down the Cheek
That hides my skull.

(Allen Ginsberg qtd. In Schumacher 332)¹

Keywords: Allen Ginsberg; William Blake; cultural memory; communicative memory; Urizen; Moloch; hyper-rationalization

Abstract: *The present paper uses Jan Assmann's acceptance of cultural and communicative memory, intertwining them in order to attest the cultural and communicative revival of William Blake's spiritual vision in the context of Allen Ginsberg's conceptualization of post-war, American hyper-rationalization and the moulding of his Beat(ific) counterculture. Just as the English bard had had visions of his poetic predecessors. Ginsberg hallucinated of "Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war" and had a life-changing auditory experience that marked his calling to be a prophet. Blake's Ginsbergian revival is both communicative and cultural because on the one hand it is inspired by a vision, a prophetic direct connection with the English bard that verbally communicated his personal representation of the past and on the other hand, Blake's prophecies and influential literary writings render him a specialized bearer of memory and a shaper of cultural memory. As the destructive, egocentric, single-minded use of reason travels from Urizen to Moloch and from the Age of Reason to the Cold War years, so does the need to poetically prophesize the downfall of people who let themselves bound my "mind-forged manacles" and consequently forget about their inherent and infinite divinity. Echoing William Blake, yet adapting the poet's philosophy to the cultural context of mid twentieth century America, Allen Ginsberg denounces the sleep of reason and the destructive power of the science of despair built upon the machinery of reason, as well as the resulted proneness towards egocentrism, materialism and conformism at the detriment of visionary imagination, spontaneity and spirituality.*

In July 1948, a mystical experience illuminated Allen Ginsberg's mind and expanded his consciousness beyond contemporary times, beyond rationalistic and materialistic America, towards William Blake's spiritual and prophetic manifold vision, towards divine imagination and infinity. This occurrence would establish Blake as Ginsberg's spiritual mentor, providing the spiritual pillar of support for Allen Ginsberg's Beat(ific) counterculture. Even though critics, such as Harold Bloom, dismissed Blake's

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¹ Allen Ginsberg journal entry cf. Schumacher 332.

association with Ginsberg on the account that the latter's canonicity was highly debatable, others, such as Tony Trigilio² concluded that there was much to say about the prophetic, religious and political authority shared by the two poets. Yet the existing papers that tackle the connection between Blake and Ginsberg either do not refer to them in isolation and detail or do not centre their arguments upon their fight against the misuse of reason exemplified by Urizen and Moloch in particular by means of the conceptual tools of cultural memory. The present paper will use Jan Assmann's cultural and communicative memory, intertwining them so as to attest the cultural revival of William Blake in the context of Allen Ginsberg's conceptualization of post-war, American hyper-rationalization. More specifically, after a short introduction into the methodological framework, the following few pages will deal with Blake and Ginsberg's prophetic calling, as well as the way in which the destructive, egocentric, single-minded use of reason travels from Urizen to Moloch, treading the belief in the divine and curative powers of visionary imagination.

Jan Assmann remoulded Maurice Habwachs' concept of "collective memory", creating the distinction between communicative and cultural memory. While the former is everyday memory, subjective, disorganized and referring to a mobile, recent past, the latter is objectivised, specialized and pointing to a distant, fixed past (Assmann and Czaplicka 126–130). Communicative memory even lacks cultural characteristics because it is not institutionalized. Apparently the two types of memory are incompatible, yet Ginsberg's relationship to his overseas mystical mentor is far too complex to respect this binary scheme, therefore this case study captures an overlapping of the two ways to remember.

Both William Blake and his American disciple considered themselves prophets³. For Blake visions were part of everyday life, as he proclaimed visual and auditory connections to angels, prophets: "Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me" (*A Critical "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"* 13) and poets before him. Moreover, he was sure to write upon the command of Heaven: "I have written this poem from immediate Dictation . . . without Premeditation" (*ibid.* 71). Also, as a poet-prophet, he realized that "the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God" (*ibid.* 13) and that it was the visionary's responsibility to pass on his otherworldly memories in order to reveal his contemporaries' erroneous path.

In this sense, Blake was a teacher to Ginsberg who admitted in a 1976 interview that he "had [had] absolutely no interest in religion, God or spirituality before that vision" ("Online Interviews"), before he had a direct apprehension of the English bard's voice.

² See Trigilio's 2000 book *Strange Prophecies Anew: Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg*

³ Blake had written: "In futurity/ I prophetic see/ That the earth from sleep/ (Grave the sentence deep)/ Shall arise an seek/ For her maker meek" ("The Little Girl Lost" 239) and Ginsberg followed: "I am Thy prophet come home this world to scream an unbearable Name thru my 5 senses hideous sixth" (*Collected "Magic Psalm"* 263)

Thus, the poet's mystical audition of Blake reciting to him "Ah! Sunflower" and "The Sick Rose" in his own apartment triggered a mystical vision of himself and of the entire universe: "I realized that the poem was talking about me . . . I saw the depths of the universe . . . that was the moment I was born for" ("A Blake Experience" 122). Ginsberg understood that this sudden awakening was his calling to become a visionary poet-prophet, his initiation into spontaneously translating the Divine: "Translate the speechless stanzas of the rose/ Into my poem, and I vow to copy/ Every petal on a page" (*Collected "Psalm II"* 28). As the poet asserted in a televised interview "the entire universe was the manifestation of one mind. My teacher was William Blake, my life-work poesy, transmitting that spontaneous awareness to mankind" (*No More to Say & Nothing to Weep For*).

This auditory experience was a private, direct interaction that was closer to communicative memory than to cultural memory because Ginsberg was subject to a prophetic mouth to mouth (not just mouth to ear) memory transmission, meant to be communicative and communicated, "shared...through the means of verbal communication" ("Communicative and Cultural Memory" 110), passed on from generation to generation, from Blake's England to Ginsberg's America, not as historical knowledge, but as "private interpretation of a person's own past" (*idem*). Time and space contracted and collided with the present, allowing for unmediated communicative memory to be formed in a non-institutional environment (*ibid.* 111). But for grasping the target of Blake's indignation, Ginsberg inevitably had to immerse himself in his teacher's world because "the zeitgeist, and the habitus of the historical actors are also communicated" (Welzer 288) in the process of communicative memory transmission. At the same time, as an influential mentor, prophet and well-known poet, Blake's status was a privileged one that gave him the legitimacy to shape memory and if there could be no talk of exchangeable roles (which is the case for communicative memory), but of bearers of memory, then Blake's revival is drawn closer to cultural memory: "Cultural memory always has its specialists . . . teachers, artists, clerks . . . specialized carriers of memory. (*ibid.* 114)

Writing in the "Age of Reason", William Blake felt the need to warn his contemporaries against falling prey to the hyper-rationalization and egocentric behaviour promoted by the supporters of science and experimentalism.

I come . . . To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour, To cast off Bacon, Locke and Newton from Albion's covering,
To take off his filthy garments and clothe him with Imagination; . . .
To cast off the idiot Questioner, who is always questioning . . .
Who publishes Doubt and calls it Knowledge; whose Science is Despair.
("Milton a Poem.")

To let oneself be dominated by reason meant to negate one's spirit and indulge in the illusion of omnipotence and omniscience, of self-sufficiency and self-reliability concerning the knowledge of the universe and thus, give in to selfhood. Furthermore, science and its ever-doubting attitude lead nowhere but to opacity, darkness and

narrowness of perception, clothing the world with filthy garments and despair. As founder of experimental science, Bacon considered doubt to be the most important starting point of intellectual inquiry, but for Blake doubt was never the answer: "If the sun and moon should doubt/ They'd immediately go out" (*A Critical "Auguries of Innocence"* 30). Secondly, Locke's "tabula rasa" and philosophy of the five senses denied the possibility of innate knowledge, attributing learning solely to experience, whereas to Blake "Innate Ideas are in Every Man, Born with him" ("Opinions: Notes on Reynolds"). Thirdly, Newton's universe was an impersonal machine based on "'laws' of nature [that] are continuous mathematical functions which are immutable, static and unchanging" (Ault 6), providing a solid base for universal, abstract inductions that Blake believed to be "general knowledges . . . that idiots possess" (*A Critical "From the annotations to Volume I"* 75). These examples of the abuse of reason led to the creation of Urizen⁴, the Zoa⁵ of reason and limitation, upon the rebellion of whom the Vegetative world was formed. This demonized character strives to understand his new world and establish its boundaries by measuring it: "Times on times he devided & measur'd" (*The Book of Urizen* 44), falling into the trap of reason and selfhood: "I alone . . . Here alone I, in books form'd of metals,/ Have written the secrets of wisdom" (*ibid.* 46-7). Blake also depicts Urizen as an "abstratd . . . self-clos'd . . . self-contemplating shadow." (*ibid.* 44-6)

Almost one hundred and fifty years later, during the Cold War, Allen Ginsberg found himself deploring the overuse of reason and its selfishness as well. As a Sun Flower-poet, he needed to turn his head away from the "trees of machinery" (*Collected "Sunflower Sutra"* 146) of 1950s America. The country was undergoing "intensive mechanization and more application of new technology...was taken as the supreme ideology" ("Beat Generation"), as proof of progress, technological lead over Russia and guarantee of luxury. However, as a side-effect, this transformed people into quasi-dehumanized, locomotive-like figures who have forgotten about their spiritual selves: "Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive?" (*ibid.* 147) In addition, America's excessive "machinery" and hyper-industrialization was seen as a weight on the poet's natural sainthood. (*Howl "America"* 39)

Moreover, the devastating power of science that Blake had warned against led to the creation and detonation of the atomic bomb, determining America to make use of nuclear energy and take thousands of innocent lives at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Despite the arguably immoral consequences, the country went ahead with the development of the hydrogen and the neutron bombs and Ginsberg, along with most members of the Beat Generation became obsessed with the "seeds of karmic horror: mass death, mass murder

⁴ Possible etymologies: "Your Reason" or "You Reason" or the Greek "horízō" ("to set limits").

⁵ Along with the fall, Albion was fragmented into four Zoas, each with their spectre (negation/masculine aspect) and emanation (feminine aspect), as well as a heavenly and an earthly form. The four Zoas are: Urthona (imagination, inspiration, creativity), Urizen (conventional reason, law, limitation), Luvah (love, passion) and Tharmas (sensation).

[that] were planted in those years” (“Online Interviews.”) in the name of scientific progress and victory: “The pilots are sweating and nervous at the controls in the hot cabins./ Over what souls will they loose their loveless bombs?” (*Collected “Sather Gate Illumination”* 150) The American prophet needed to let the world know that the faithless science of despair would be America’s grave-digger: “I see nothing but bombs . . . These are obvious prophecies/ America will be destroyed” (*Collected “Death to Van Gogh’s Ear!”* 176–7)

As Ginsberg himself remarked, the hyper-rationalization behind the development of bombs is a Urizenic quality.

Destructive intellect . . . that’s so solidified and impacted that it doesn’t allow for any feeling . . . Just like the creators of the atom bomb, for instance, or the present, say, creators of nuclear energy, who (consider it as a) purely mental construction, with no regard to the actual waste that comes through, or the vast stockpiles of unused plutonium. So, actually, with Urizen, we’re dealing with a contemporary mentality. (*Your Reason* 20-1)

Allen Ginsberg’s dedication to studying William Blake is evident not only in his poetry, but also in his work as a teacher at the Naropa Institute where an entire course was dedicated to Blake’s cosmology and Urizen in particular. His contemporary validity is recognized in the conceptualization of Moloch⁶, the Urizenic equivalent of post-war American literature, whose “name is the mind” (*Howl “Howl”* 22) both because he is a product of the human mind (in Blake’s sense of being an inner god instead of an exterior destroyer) and because he creates “mind-forged manacles” (*A Critical “London”* 274), by transforming people into mere soulless robots, entrapped in prisons of hyper-rationalization and mechanization:

Mental Moloch!... Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse... Moloch whose mind is pure machinery... Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments!... blind capitals! demonic industries! (*Howl “Howl”* 21–2)

Moloch’s ten armies are a reminder of Urizen’s “self-begotten armies” (*The Book of Urizen* 48) and become the embodiment of misbalanced reason turned violent, for Moloch “bashed open [people’s] skulls and ate up their brains and imagination” (*Howl “Howl”* 21), without caring for their souls and humanity. For Blake too “Imagination equals Humanity, the good in man, which in turn is the essence of God” (Schorer 172). Urizenic Moloch eats imagination and spreads instead horror, blind reason and self interest. In Ginsberg’s American scenario, Moloch’s selfishness is represented by the fact that his blood is running money, his loves are oil and stone and his soul is made of banks. The Moloch-minded society is fooled by the power of money at the detriment of personal salvation and eternal vision: “Money! Money! Money! Shrieking mad celestial money of

⁶ Influenced by the false Semitic god: “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God” (Leviticus 18:21) and the modern English term that designates requirement of sacrifice, but infused with richer, personalized significance.

illusion! Money made of nothing, starvation, suicide! . . . Money against Eternity!" (Collected "Death to Van Gogh's Ear!" 178).

Both Blake and Ginsberg trusted that earthly life was a shadow of our eternal selves, but that many people were forgetful of their origin and went through their lives asleep and oblivious of their true holy nature: "This world of imagination is infinite and eternal, whereas the world of generation, or vegetation, is finite and temporal" (*A Critical "From 'Vision of the Last Judgment'"* 37) Therefore, the philosophy of reason and scientific experimentation that dominated Blake's time and brought about deist beliefs was thought by the English poet to be superficial because it was reliant on something that was narrow and finite. It was also condescending, because it mocked innate, individual divinity.

Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau: . . .
 You throw the sand against the wind,
 And the wind blows it back again.
 And every sand becomes a gem
 Reflected in the beams divine. (*A Critical "Mock on"* 284)

Voltaire and Rousseau are nominated because of their deism which assumed the existence of a passive God⁷ who created the universe like a watchmaker whose finished work needs no interference. It was, therefore, a philosophy that denied revelation and miracles, attempting to understand the existence of God only by means of rational thought. In the third chapter of "Jerusalem", Blake openly attacks deists as "enemies of the human race . . . [who] worship the god of this world (*A Critical "Preface to Chapter III of Jerusalem"* 32), ignoring the fact that "Everything that lives is holy" (*A Critical "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"* 20), illuminated by the beams of God. Reason was the pillar of support for deism and used in isolation, it could never lead to anything more than narrowed perceptions.

Similarly, Ginsberg's poems were "the workings of the vision haunted mind and not that reason which never changes" (*Collected "Psalm I"* 26). However, instead of directing his attacks towards specific contemporaries, he considered the governing of reason to be a collective tendency of his Moloch-led society. Moloch was the reason for which sunflowers saw themselves as locomotives: because they were all "asleep" in Moloch, "frightened out of [their] natural ecstasy!" (*Howl "Howl"* 22) and smothered by "a cloud of sexless hydrogen" (*ibid.* 21-2). Instead of realizing, like Ginsberg and Blake had that the whole world was holy, society dwelled in earthly reason: "Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! every man's an angel!" (*Howl "Foot Note to Howl"* 27)

In John Clellon Holmes's famous 1952 article, the author insisted that, as opposed to the "lost" First World War generation, the Beats were linked by the need to revive faith: "it [was] the first generation in several centuries for which the act of faith has been an

⁷ Influenced by Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" or "Prima Mobile" - setting the universe in motion, while being motionless itself ("Exploring Deism").

obsessive problem" ("This is the Beat"). The problem that this group saw in society was essentially a spiritual one and Allen Ginsberg's was a spiritual protest "an exercise in pop-cult mysticism" (Niemi 7) that revealed the beatific in the Beat. Ginsberg admitted to seeking "spiritual liberation . . . [from] the mechanical assault on human nature... culminating in the bomb" ("Online Interviews"). The only way to achieve this was to widen one's awareness and awaken from the sleep of reason: "Blake became Allen Ginsberg's guru and awakened in him an ancient, esoteric dream-awareness . . . 'The Message is: Widen the area of consciousness' (Pevateaux 60). In the memory of William Blake, the Ginsbergian counterculture was a mystical one, teaching people that the world can be seen through a different lens than that of scientific exploration: "The primary project of counter culture . . . [is] to open ourselves to the visionary imagination . . . to claim like Blake . . . that there are eyes which see the world not as commonplace sight or scientific scrutiny sees it" (Roszak 240). In other words, the English poet-prophet triggered Ginsberg's intense awareness of the inherent holiness of everything, be it socially acceptable or not, reasonable or not: "Blessed be He in homosexuality! Blessed be He in Paranoia! Blessed be He in the city! Blessed be He in the Book" (*Collected "Kaddish"* 233).

When numbed by the sleep of reason, society cannot reach a prophetic level of rebellious dissatisfaction and sinks ever deeper into conformism. This dangerous attitude was clearly shaped in Blake's depiction of Urizen's limitation and single-mindedness. The primordial god of reason established his laws in a Book of Eternal Brass that he created in solitude, "with a strong hand" (*The Book of Urizen* 47), stressing his confidence and unwillingness to compromise or be open to multiple perspectives: "One command, one joy, one desire,/ One curse, one weight, one measure, One King, one God, one Law" (idem). The singleness of authority inevitably leads to oppression, tyranny and censorship, to "a solid without fluctuation" (*ibid.* 46) that admits no dynamic contraries or deviations from the norm. The fact that rational thinking and singularity of mind are interconnected surfaces from Blake's letter to Thomas Butts, where the author opposes his manifold understanding of the world with the one track mind of scientists such as Isaac Newton: "Now I a fourfold vision see . . . May God us keep/From Single vision & Newtons sleep" ("To Thomas Butts"). If the fourfold vision was attributed to prophets, the single vision was assigned to those who made the Urizenic error of falling back solely on the linear thought of reason.

While not having a book of brass, Ginsberg's monster-god is made of cement and aluminium, materials by means of which his hardened singularity of vision and his unfortunate durability, respectively, are underlined. His society is Urizenic, "in chains of the mind locked up" (Easson K. and Easson R. 51) because it is ruled by a "heavy judger of men" (*Howl "Howl"* 21). The judgmental attitude was due to the idea that America "should work like a well oiled machine" ("The Beat Generation: the Causes") and did not afford to have broken pieces, therefore people needed to conform to the majority. In a conservative, straight, super-capitalist country, Ginsberg found it difficult to fit his homosexuality and Russian communist descent and fought to give America a polyphonic voice. As Blake denounced the simplistic one-sided laws of Urizen, Ginsberg expressed

the pain that Moloch brought along with his judgment and similar reductive and narrowing rationale. Allen Ginsberg and the Beat counterculture sought to break free from the same oppressive monotony which makes Blake's text be assumed as memory instead of mere knowledge: "Cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be proclaimed as 'ours' . . . 'memory' and not just knowledge about the past." (Assmann 113)

Moloch's One Law was capitalism: "Senator Joseph McCarthy led a campaign of intimidation that resulted in the 'outing' of hundreds of individuals with real or alleged ties to communism" (Gair 13) and his One Measure was heterosexuality. Being outside this pattern rendered one a parasite and an unnatural, dangerous individual. This frozen solidity of thought inevitably brings about censorship in everyday life and in the literary sphere as well: "you had a literary atmosphere where there was censorship . . . a closed form in poetry and a closed form of mind" ("Online Interviews") The closed mind is the triumph of hegemonic reason that forces the inner eye to be closed and perceive merely a single vision of darkness that is as static, fixed and unchanging as a universal law of science. In Ginsberg's view the solution to this problem was breaking the Urizenic laws and challenge "every ban" (*A Critical "London"* 274) by shocking people out of their "a stony sleep" (*The Book of Urizen* 49) that prevailed in "the sort of hyper-rationalistic, hyper-scientific, hyper-rationalizing of the post-war era" ("Online Interviews").

To conclude, the memory of William Blake's mystical revolution and quest for spirituality by means of discrediting the scientific smothering of imaginative perception is reconstructed so as to highlight Allen Ginsberg's spiritual protest against post-war American hyper-rationalization and nuclear fixation. Blake's Ginsbergian revival is both communicative and cultural because on the one hand it is inspired by a vision, a prophetic direct connection with the English bard that verbally communicated his personal representation of the past and on the other hand, Blake's prophecies and influential literary writings render him a specialized bearer of memory and a shaper of cultural memory. This case allows for the two different *modi memoriandi* that Jan Assmann discusses to combine into a type of memory that is simultaneously direct and mediated. The cultural and communicative memory of William Blake, determined Allen Ginsberg to transform Urizen's egocentrism and limiting, linear solidity of thought into Moloch's materialism and censorship-prone conformism in an attempt to awaken society from its numbing sleep of reason and catch a glimpse of the beyond.

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