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TABOO SUBJECTS AS A VEHICLE OF NONCONFORMITY. ALLEN GINSBERG FACING THE CONVENTIONAL AMERICA OF THE 1940s-1960s

Artykuł przedstawia radykalną postawę Allena Ginsberga, która doprowadziła tego amerykańskiego poetę do zyskania miana nonkonformisty, wyobcowanego członka amerykańskiej społeczności. Pomógł mu w tym jego niekonwencjonalny styl życia oraz poglądy tak silnie odzwierciedlone w jego twórczości. Artykuł ukazuje otwartość Ginsberga dotyczącą tematów tabu ówczesnej Ameryki: spraw homoseksualnych oraz doświadczeń ze środkami halucynogennymi; postawy uznawane za kontrowersyjne, a wręcz obsceniczne, nieliczące z moralnością społeczeństwa amerykańskiego lat 1940-tych – 1960-tych.

I. The notion of nonconformity

Defining Allen Ginsberg as a nonconformist, it is vital to present the causes and conditions that characterize the nature of nonconformity. People are not puppets. For reasons of their own, or because of the circumstances in which they find themselves, individuals may choose nonconformity. This word implies „violating social norms, acting in a way that does not conform to social expectations“¹.

People are controlled mainly by being socialized so that they fit their roles in the expected way through habit and preference. The crucial part of one's role preparation is the development of attitudes and wishes which make the role attractive. Most role failures occur, not because one is unable to perform the role's tasks, but because of being entrapped in a role one does not really want or enjoy.

¹ Grey, Paul: *Heading Sociology*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston of Canada, Limited 1987. P. 150.

Nonconformists rebel in order to assert their individuality. In a society, the majority is inclined to defend the status quo, while the source of energy for the innovations and changes constitute the members of the minority, that is the individuals either dissatisfied with the present system or able to imagine new possibilities, and alternative and creative ways of struggling with the existing problems. As one psychologist says, „Creative individuals are not overtly concerned about what others think of them. They are willing to risk ridicule by proposing ideas that may initially appear foolish or off the mark“².

„Conformity is the law of social life. Yet it is the nonconformist who often starts changes and who at times directs the way to progress. Control and order at time bring about lack of concern for changes that are needed. Only when someone rebels and challenges the accustomed ways of living does progress come about“³.

II. Ginsberg confronting the America of the 1940s–1960s

The post-war era was a time of extraordinary insecurity, of profound powerlessness as far as individual effort was concerned, when personal responsibility was being renounced in favour of corporate largeness, when the catchwords were coordination and adjustment.

For some minorities, the American life - with all status-seekers owning the same two-car garages houses, sharing the same life patterns: the father away at work, the mother at home caring for the children and socializing with friends - was boring, spiritually unrewarding, they believed that there must have been something else. So slowly they started to question authority, to be outraged about racism, to question other things.

The history of America in the years after the Second World War is a history of subcultures. America's population was split between the normal majority and the deviant minority (such as junkies or juvenile delinquents). In the conservative eyes of the media these different 'gangs' were a new threat to the Land of the Free - an enemy within. What was worse, these wild groups seemed to be encouraging America's other minorities to become equally vocal. African-Americans, immigrants and homosexuals were suddenly demanding rights and freedoms.

² Wade, Carole: *Psychology*. Ginn and Company 1980. P. 297.

³ Landis, Paul: *Sociology*. Lexington: Ginn and Company 1980. P. 125.

The Beats movement, „the whole Beat Generation thing, if it's anything, is prophets howling in the wilderness against a crazy civilization”⁴, was a crystallization of a sweeping discontent with American 'virtues' of progress and power. As Lucien Carr said about the Beats, they „were trying to look at the world in a new light, trying to look at the world in a way that gave it some meaning. Trying to find values [...] that were valid. And it was through literature that all this was supposed to be done”⁵.

The Beats members, including Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Lucien Carr and more, were all trying in some way to find themselves outside traditional and institutional frameworks, or rather, to find more satisfying traditions and institutional possibilities. Although it was far from a specifically gay subculture, „homosexuality weaved its way through descriptions of the North Beach scene as a persistent, albeit minor, motif”⁶.

Homosexuality was not something spoken about casually in 1950s. „Through the Beats' example, gays could perceive themselves as non-conformists rather than deviates, as rebels against stultifying norms rather than immature, unstable personalities”⁷. It was the Beat attitudes toward sex that were important, not who was sleeping with whom. For them, 'sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life’⁸. The Beats rejected the primacy of heterosexuality. They „construed an unfettered, uncensored sexuality as a good in itself ... They re-imagined and revised male homosexuality, and brought out of history a Whitmanesque tradition to support them”⁹. Of the group, Ginsberg was the most vocal proponent of homosexuality. Ginsberg shared his own sense of life, something that might be defined as an intricate web of perceptions, judgments, feelings and aspirations. In 'Independence Day Manifesto,' in his attack on the authority and the present state in America, Ginsberg cries:

Deviants from the mass sexual stereotype, quietists, those who will not work for money, or fib and make arms for hire, or join armies in murder and threat, those who wish to loaf, think, rest in visions, act beautifully on

⁴ Campbell, James: *This Is the Beat Generation*. Great Britain: Vintage 2000. P. 267.

⁵ Miles, Barry: *Ginsberg. A Biography*. London: Virgin Publishing Ltd. 2000. P. 45.

⁶ Hickey, Morgen: *The Bohemian Register: An Annotated Bibliography Of The Beat Movement*. New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press 1990. P. 23.

⁷ Watson, Steven: *The Birth Of The Beat Generation*. New York: Pantheon 1995. P. 86.

⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 86.

⁹ Rosset, Barney: *Evergreen Review Reader 1957–1966*. New York: Blue Moon Books 1993. P. 65.

their own, speak truthfully in public, inspired by Democracy - what is their psychic fate now in America? An America, the greater portion of whose economy is yoked to mental and mechanical preparations for the war?¹⁰

Ginsberg's nonconformity to the lifestyles and norms of the America of his time was manifested both in his way of living and in his poetry. Searching for a life of his own, Allen began to experiment with everything that for 1940s and 1950s America was illegal and which American society was opposed to: drugs, crime, gay sex and racial integration. Moreover, in his poetry, Ginsberg exploded society's taboos, from drugs to sex to censorship. In the 1960s, Allen was a long-time public advocate of LSD, marijuana, mantra chanting and spiritual exploration as a means of expanding consciousness.

III. Drugs that „open the door to God”

... as I read William Blake
in Innocence
That day I heard Blake's voice
I say I heard Blake's voice ...
and aural hallucination
produced by the reconstruction of syllables on
the printed page in iron rhythm
that rose to my ear in a
Voice ...¹¹

In 1948 Ginsberg experienced extraordinary mystical visions of William Blake's voice „out of the burning bush”¹². It was „like hearing the doom of the whole universe, and at the same time the inevitable beauty of that doom”¹³. Allen claimed: „this was the moment I was born for. This initiation”¹⁴, and he promised himself „never forget - never forget, ... never deny”¹⁵. After the vision, he began a series of experiments with mind-altering drugs. He took every powerful hallucinogen he could find, from

¹⁰ Ginsberg, Allen: *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952–1995*. Harper Collins Publisher 2000. P. 4.

¹¹ Portuges, Paul: *A Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*. Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson 1978. P. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, P. 9.

¹³ *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1995. P. 2615.

¹⁴ Portuges, P.: *A Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*. P. 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, P. 37.

laughing gas to mescaline, heroine, hashish, LSD in his effort to widen his consciousness. The vision of voice from beyond the grave resulted in many poems of direct reference to his visionary experience. The poem „Vision 1948” attempts to do this:

I shudder with intelligence and I
Wake in the deep light
And hear vast machinery
Descending without sound,
Intolerable to me, too bright,
And shaken by the sight
The eye goes blind before the world goes round¹⁶.

„The Lion For Real” records Blake appearing as a symbolic lion chasing Allen and trying to consume him:

I came home and found a lion in my living room
Rushed out on the fire-escape screaming Lion! Lion!
.....
Called up my old Reichian analyst
Who'd kicked me out of therapy for smoking marijuana
'It's happened' I panted 'There's Lion in my room'
'I'm afraid any discussion would have no value' he hung up
I went to my old boyfriend we got drunk with his girlfriend
I kissed him and announced I had a lion with a mad gleam in my eye
We wound up fighting on the floor I bit his eyebrows and he kicked me out
I ended masturbating in his jeep parked in the street moaning 'Lion'¹⁷.

The stanzas reflect the desperate situation Allen found himself in, when he told people about his visions and nobody would believe him.

The poem „The Eye Altering Alters All” is a dense and highly symbolic attempt to assert that everyone could have visions if they conquered their prejudice against the miraculous and ceased to deny the visionary seed in all of us:

Many seek and never see,
Anyone can tell them why.
O they weep and O they cry

¹⁶ Ginsberg, Allen: *The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems 1948–1952*. New York: Grey Fox 1973. P. 7.

¹⁷ Ginsberg, Allen: *Kaddish and Other Poems 1958–1960*. Bydgoszcz: Pomorze 1992. P. 82.

And never take until they try
Unless they try it in their sleep¹⁸.

Allen was convinced that people would be open to visions if he introduced the idea into the general stream of thought and encouraged others to try it. Though his own vision was definitely not a dream, Ginsberg believed that people would accept the possibility of visions if they realized that a similar quality existed in dreams¹⁹.

The land of visions was a refuge in between queerness and normality, where it was unnecessary to make the choice between two opposites. For a young poet living in mid-twentieth century America, the visionary path was a difficult journey to pursue. People were prejudiced against the mysticism. The mystic tradition in Western culture was avoided and rejected by a majority of critics. R.D. Laing has stated that „any modern man or woman who experiences visions automatically is condemned as 'psychoti'”²⁰ and so was Ginsberg.

Experimenting with drugs like marijuana and nitrous oxide to induce further visions, or what Ginsberg later described as 'an exalted state of mind,' he felt that the poet's duty was to bring a visionary consciousness of reality to his readers.

„Mescaline” begins a series of poems in which Ginsberg explores his terror of death under the influence of various psychedelic drugs, including mescaline, LSD, codeine, hashish, marijuana and heroine. The poem, together with others of that kind („Lysergic Acid,” or „Laughing Gas”) „records visions experienced after drinking ayahuasca, a powerful 'Amazon spiritual potion.' The message is: Widen the area of consciousness”²¹. The poet yearns for mystic illumination, for truth beyond the register of the senses.

In „Mescaline,” while on ayahuasca, he experiences:

[...]
a light burst from God's delicate hand sends down a wooden
dove to the calm virgin
Beato Angelico's universe
[...]
What happens when the death gong hits rotting ginsberg on

¹⁸ Ginsberg, A.: *The Gates of Wrath*. P. 3.

¹⁹ Portuges, P.: *A Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*. P. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, P. 146.

²¹ Miles, B.: *Ginsberg. A Biography*. P. 87.

the head
what universe do I enter²²

In his „trip” on LSD, „Lysergic Acid,” he speaks of himself as:

[...]
I allen Ginsberg a separate consciousness
I who want to be God
I who want to hear the infinite minutest vibration of eternal
harmony
[...]
But at the far end of the universe the million eyed Spyder that
hath no name
spinneth of itself endlessly ...²³

In these two poems Ginsberg explores his psyche and questions his own existence and death. He demands for himself the utmost personal freedom. „Magic Psalm,” with Ginsberg's hallucinated states, depicts:

O Phantom that my mind pursues from year to year descend
from heaven to this shaking flesh
catch up my fleeting eye in the vast Ray that knows no bounds
– Inseparable – Master –
Giant outside Time with all its falling leaves – Genius of the
Universe – Magician in Nothingness where appear red
clouds –
Lover that comes
to fuck me forever – white gown on the Eyeless Squid –
Asshole of the Universe into which I disappear – Elastic Hand that spoke to
Crane –²⁴

The point of the experiments, as Allen explained, was to follow Blake's command to 'cleanse the doors of perception,' to heighten his perception of all kind. In „Laughing Gas” Ginsberg confesses:

High on Laughing Gas
I've been here before
the odd vibration of
the same odd universe
[...]
It's the instant of going

²² Ginsberg, A.: *Kaddish and Other Poems*. P. 83.

²³ *Ibid.*, P. 86.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 92.

into or coming out of
 existence that is
 important – to catch on
 to the secret of the magic
 box
 stepping outside the universe
 by means of Nitrous Oxide
 anesthetizing mind-consciousness²⁵.

Under the influence of drugs there came one of his greatest poems, „Howl,” - a glorification of drugs: „I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,” and homosexuality: „who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, / and screamed with joy...”²⁶, the values propagated by the youth culture of the 1960s. „Howl” makes little distinction between race, sexual orientation, mental stability, or any other determining factor in its treatment of these outcast souls. They are united by their rejection and expulsion from the majority mindset of America.

How far did Ginsberg go in his attempts to reach beyond the ordinary consciousness? Probably guided by his master's words: „the road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom”²⁷, Allen followed Coleridge's drug tradition and started a Psychedelic Era of opening 'doors of perception.' The poet enabled himself to achieve the cleansing of his perception he had sought so desperately, in understanding the society's sin as the death of the spirit, the soul, and the body, expressed in „Howl” and „Sunflower Sutra.” The society, causing so many deaths, both bodily and spiritual, contributed to his vision of eternity, where after „annihilating the sidewalk, annihilating reality”²⁸, the poet achieves a sense of self „screaming and dancing in the praise of Eternity”²⁹.

In an amphetamine-inspired epic poem, „Independence Day Manifesto,” Ginsberg, as a nonconformist, suffers and complains because:

The poets and those who share their activities, or exhibit some sign of dress, hair or demeanor of understanding, or hipness, are ridiculed. Those of us

²⁵ Ibid., P. 104.

²⁶ Ginsberg, Allen: *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books 1982. S. 9.

²⁷ Miles, B.: *Ginsberg. A Biography*. P. 32.

²⁸ Ginsberg, Allen: *Empty Mirror: Early Poems*. New York: Totem Press in association with Corinth Books 1961. P. 40.

²⁹ Ibid., P. 40.

who have used certain benevolent drugs (marijuana) to alter our consciousness in order to gain insight are hunted down in the street by police. Peyote, an historic vision-producing agent, is prohibited on pain of arrest. Those who have used opiates and junk are threatened with permanent jail and death. To be a junkie in America is like having been a Jew in Nazi Germany³⁰.

Virtually everything he did and which was connected with drugs was motivated by his concern for investigating and exploring the nature of consciousness. „The whole point of smoking grass or taking peyote was a probe, an examination of what is the alteration of consciousness caused by amphetamine, or morphine, or marijuana, or heroin, or peyote, or mescaline”³¹, Ginsberg recalled. His experiences convinced him that drugs were a possible means of altering public consciousness, a way of introducing ideas of a lifestyle closer to the Beat ideals of spontaneity, sexual openness, candour, literary honesty and spiritual liberation. He campaigned extensively for the legalisation of marijuana and pondered over methods of introducing psychedelics to the general population.

IV. Allen's homosexual disclosure

Subjects of Ginsberg's writings were shocking to the literary sensibility of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s and, therefore, interpreted as controversial and even obscene. The authorities objected to Allen's openness concerning his homosexuality as well as the graphic sexual language.

„In Society” is an important poem notable for the first use of taboo words in anything written by Ginsberg; for a metaphorical acceptance of homosexuality; and for the boldness – inspired by the poet's love of another man – to speak back to a woman 'who looked like / a princess,' and who has spoken harshly to him:

I walked into the cocktail party
room and found three or four queers
talking together in queertalk.
I tried to be friendly but heard
myself talking to one in hiptalk

³⁰ Ginsberg, A.: *Deliberate Prose*. P. 4.

³¹ Miles, B.: *Ginsberg. A Biography*. P. 71.

'I'm glad to see you,' he said, and
looked away ...³²

More people arrive at the party, including 'a fluffy female' who glares at the poet and says: 'I don't like you'

'Why you narcissistic bitch! How
can you decide when you don't even
know me, ' I continued in a violent
and messianic voice, inspired at
last, dominating the whole room³³.

Ginsberg's homosexual desires and encounters are depicted in many of his works. In „Love Poem on Theme by Whitman”, Allen's idealised dream fantasy, Ginsberg alludes to 'the inhabitants who roam unsatisfied in the night / nude ghosts seeking each other out in the silence':

[...]
bodies locked shuddering naked, hot lips and buttocks screwed
into each other

[...]
and moans of movement, voices, hands in air, hands between
thighs,
hands in moisture on softened lips, throbbing contraction of
bellies

[...]
and I rise up from the bed replenished with last intimate gestures
and kisses of farewell —³⁴

Love was his aspiration for verse: „What am I? What do I seek? ... If I over-reach myself for love, it is because I crave it so much and have known so little of it. Love is perhaps opiate, but I know it to be creative as well”³⁵. In „The Green Automobile,” a private homosexual, joyful poem, Ginsberg celebrates his love and friendship for Neal Cassady. Allen imagines taking Cassady out onto the open road for a cross-country excursion. Transforming the journey into the search for sexual freedom, the heroes explore the downtown pool rooms, jails, brothels and jazz clubs as well as each other's bodies:

³² Ginsberg, A.: *Empty Mirror*. P. 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, P. 5.

³⁴ Ginsberg, Allen: *Reality Sandwiches 1953–1960*. The United States of America 1963. P. 41.

³⁵ Miles, B.: *Ginsberg. A Biography*. P. 65.

He'd come running out
to my car full of heroic beer
and jump screaming at the wheel
for he is the greater driver.

[...]

But first we'll drive the stations of downtown,
poolhall flophouse jazzjoint jail
whorehouse down Folsom
to the darkest alleys of Larimer

[...]

The windshield's full of tears
rain wets our naked breasts
we kneel together in the shade
amid the traffic of night in paradise

and now renew the solitary vow
we made each other take
in Texas, once:
I can't inscribe here. ...³⁶

„Malest Cornifici Tou Catullo” is Ginsberg's affectionate poem about his life-long love, Peter Orlovsky:

I'm happy, Kerouac, your madman Allen's
finally made it: discovered a new young cat,
and my imagination of an eternal boy
walks on the streets of San Francisco,
handsome, and meets me in cafeterias
and loves me ...³⁷

„History of Visions - A List” describes Allen and Peter's act of love: „With Peter in Assisi, the clouds afright over the Umbrian plains in moonlite; cocksucking in the darkness on the grass in front of the cathedral doors”³⁸.

Many people regarded his poems as obscene and vulgar, because of the vivid sexual language. He was more than frank about the nature of his sexuality, as his erotic desires and lovemaking committed to paper were presented very naturally and explicitly. „Many Loves” is a very graphic depiction:

³⁶ Ginsberg, A.: *Reality Sandwiches* 1953–1960. P. 11

³⁷ Miles, B.: *Ginsberg. A Biography*. P. 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 226.

I lay with my hair intermixed with his, he asking me 'What shall we do now?'

...

Took up his hard-on and held it, feeling it throb and pressing my own at his knee & breathing showed him I needed him, cock, for my dreams of insatiety & lone love³⁹.

Ginsberg expressed his gayness openly and forcefully. „Please Master” is a notorious poem of the 1968 of the painfully overt sexual revelations:

Please master can I touch your cheek
 please master can I kneel at your feet
 please master can I loosen your blue pants
 please master can I gaze at your golden haired belly
 please master can I gently take down your shorts
 [...]

please master can I lay my ear pressed to your stomach
 please master can I wrap my arms around your white ass
 please master can I lick your groin curled with soft blond fur
 please master can I touch my tongue to your rosy asshole
 please master may I pass my face to your balls,
 [...]

please master order me down on the floor ...
 Master drive down till it hurts me the softness the
 Softness please master make love to my ass, give body to
 centre, & fuck me for good like a girl ...⁴⁰

The America of Ginsberg's times was shocked at his shamelessness, which pleased him enormously. Ginsberg evinced his homosexuality and got an evil thrill from the horrified „all-American” responses.

Living in America prejudiced against the outcasts, Ginsberg asks in „Independence Day Manifesto” whether American society has the right to judge the deviants, the nonconformists:

How many hypocrites are there in America? ... Who shall prohibit an art from being published to the world? What conspirators have power to determine our mode of consciousness, our sexual enjoyments, our different labors or our loves?⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., P. 82.

⁴⁰ Ibid., P. 15.

⁴¹ Ginsberg, A.: *Deliberate Prose*. P. 5.

The bravery of Ginsberg's confessions, revelations of homosexuality, made without guilt or shame, was inspirational to homosexuals across the country and heralded the beginnings of the gay liberation movement. Ginsberg maintained his gay 'marriage' to Peter Orlovsky as exemplary. He gave scores of benefits for gay causes and championed the cause in interviews and the media. „In the history of the struggle to achieve acceptance for homosexuals in American society, Ginsberg was a central figure”⁴².

V. Summary

A great mind, Allen Ginsberg, never failed to make an impression. Readers seem unable to approach his work without immediately taking a strong stand for or against him. His work preached love and equality among all of society's parts. Armed only with his poems and his chants, Ginsberg waged war on a societal system he saw as poisoned and poisoning. As Elizabeth Farnsworth says:

He was openly homosexual, brazenly public about his attraction to drugs, and a leading advocate of what he termed 'flower power' – leftist, anti-war politics. [...] His detractors, including Norman Podhoretz, writing in the magazine *Commentary*, blamed Ginsberg for glorifying drugs and madness and for helping bring on the wild youth culture of the 1960s.⁴³

His early verse shocked Eisenhower's America with its celebration of homosexuality and drugs. „The first great thing about Ginsberg was his refusal to be embarrassed or to deny himself”⁴⁴. The poet was truly and simply a free soul on stage. Because he was seen like an outcast, he stated that he „would rather be thought mad than do what is expected”⁴⁵.

⁴² Miles, B.: Ginsberg. A Biography. P. 574.

⁴³ Farnsworth, Elizabeth: Allan: Allen Ginsberg in America. New York: Random House 1969. P. 46.

⁴⁴ Asher, Levi: On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg. University of Michigan Press 1984. P. 53.

⁴⁵ Portuges, P.: A Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg. P. 45.

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