

THE PLAY ON INCARNATION AS ARTISTIC CREATION IN ALLEN GINSBERG'S "HOWL"

Andreea Paris

University of Bucharest

Foreign Languages and Literatures, English Department

Bd. M. Kogălniceanu 36-46, Sector 5, 050107, Bucharest, Romania,

+40-21-307 73 00, Fax: +40-21-313 17 60

paris.andreea@yahoo.com

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to unveil the interconnection between various instances of incarnation expressed in Allen Ginsberg's seminal twentieth century poem "Howl". The Beat author seemingly plays with the theological notion of Incarnation and uses it as main analogy for the spiritual embodiment of his poetic/linguistic creation – that is the poem itself –, which is closely linked to the physical body of the prophet as well as to the sound and technique behind jazz music, particularly bebop. Firstly, a brief overview of Incarnation in Christian terms will be given in order to stress the necessary conditions for the coexistence of spirit and matter in the person of Jesus Christ, emphasizing language as a medium of expression that recalls Messianic mediation. Subsequently, Ginsberg's use of incarnational language will be linked to the act of physical consumption in remembrance and celebration of artistic incarnation. This act acquires a similar function to that of the Eucharist, while the structural and thematic composition of "Howl" – that embodies the spontaneity of bebop and the sound of the saxophone howling the suffering of Christ – will allow for a musical incarnation with the help of jazz.

Keywords: incarnation, Christ, artist, poetry, jazz.

Introduction

In "Howl", Allen Ginsberg's literary take on the theological notion of Incarnation allows for an association of the latter with the spiritual act of the embodiment of literary creation, and more specifically of the poem "Howl" itself. The latter becomes incarnate in the body of its author and its physical consumption, which acts as a Eucharist, turns the bard into a prophet with a divine message to convey. The bridge between the spiritual and the material is also highlighted by means of poetic words which become incarnate into bebop jazz, the musicality, improvisation and rhythm of which allow for the poet-musician to sacrificially breath his own spirit into the saxophone.

In order to convey the different manners in which artistic creation becomes embodied in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl", I will start with a brief overview of Christian Incarnation in order to stress the necessary conditions for the coexistence of spirit and matter in the person of Jesus Christ. In the next section, language will be emphasized as a medium of expression that recalls Messianic mediation. Subsequently, Ginsberg's use of incarnational language will be linked to the act of ingestion and physical consumption in remembrance and celebration of artistic incarnation – an act that acquires a similar function to that of the Eucharist. Last but not least, I will deal with the manner in which the structural and thematic composition of "Howl" embodies the spontaneity of bebop. The sound of the saxophone that howls the suffering of Christ will allow for a musical incarnation with the help of jazz.

Incarnation and Christianity

The association between the Christian God of the New Testament and speech was established from the very beginning by John: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1);ⁱ later, divinity was revealed incarnate, made visible and tangible through Jesus Christ whose spirit descended to live in the flesh among people: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The importance of the use of the Greek word *Logos* as vehicle of this metaphor is evident as the latter "was thought of as a bridge between the transcendent God and the material universe" ("The Word is God the Truth is Christ") and similarly, Jesus was considered to be a messenger, a mediator by means of his condition as both God and Man.

The formation of words – and consequently of language – as example of incarnation is also discussed by St. Augustine as the co-existence of presence and absence, of transience and immanence. He maintains that thoughts are inner words of the heart that belong to no language in particular and that when they employ either a sign (in written language) or a word (in spoken language), they gain finite expression and become manifest in order to reach "men's senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men's senses" (Augustine, "On the Trinity"). What is more, "transcendence 'in the flesh' does not undo its transcendence . . . but rather points to it" (Smith 2002: 127), which means that the divine spirit is not lost in the process of linguistic incarnation, but rather takes the form of finite utterance in order to appear in the material world as sign and proof of what lies beyond. Similarly, critics such as Hans-Georg Gadamer see the Incarnation analogy as instrumental in understanding language: "the inner mental word is just as cosubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father" (Gadamer qtd. in O'Sullivan

2008: 12) and they are both necessary in the emergence of the inner word as external entity.

Incarnation and language

In the final segment of the first part of “Howl”, in which the poetic voice expresses the suffering and artistic as well as spiritual longing of “the best minds of [his] generation” (Ginsberg 1956: 9), the author establishes a strong connection between the formation of (poetic) language and the spiritual understanding of artistic expression as mediator between thought and sign, as well as between spiritual Divinity and earthly matter.

dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images
juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual
images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash
of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater
Omnipotens Aeterna Deus

to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand
before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame,
rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of
thought in his naked and endless head (Ginsberg 1956: 20)

The mystical “angelheaded hipsters” (Ginsberg 1956: 9), who are the subject of the above-mentioned fragment, transform gaps in time and space into a language of incarnation (elemental verbs, nouns and dashes of consciousness). The incarnate gaps are both absence and presence, immaterial and material, they are the rendering of eternal temporality and spatiality into physical images in the shape of juxtaposed words on paper akin to Cézanne’s juxtaposed visual images that create the ‘petite sensation’ in the mind. Therefore, the “gap between the two words—like the space gap in the canvas—there’d be a gap between the two words that the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence” (Ginsberg qtd. in Hyde 2002: 153). This gap was linked by Ginsberg with the Buddhist concept denoting emptiness, the Śūnyatā. It stands for “emptiness, absence of rational, controlled mind . . . an absolute absorption of the workings of perception . . . a medium for enlightened sensations” (Hyde 2002: 151-152).

However, incarnation is not just in the gaps, but in the words themselves as well, for the linguistic units out of which the poem is composed work as a bridge between the ghostly archangel of the soul – used by Ginsberg to emphasize the high rank of the spirit within every person – and the physicality of its appearance in the world. The verbs, nouns and punctuation used in the process of literary creation do not come into

existence *ex nihilo*. They are consciousness incarnate; they represent the inner words that are translated into human language, as well as the essential, fundamental and primordial Words that are with God at the beginning of all things and that have the power to emanate a feeling of omnipotence that turns the creator of literature into Omnipotent Eternal Father God. Thus, the act of writing and its result are sacred, allowing for the author to ascend towards a higher consciousness by “trying to observe the naked activity of the mind” (Ginsberg qtd. in Hyde 151) and then descend into material form.

The attempt to recreate “poor” human syntax is an imperative step in the process of incarnational appearance because just as God “show[s] up in terms that the finite knower can understand” (Smith 2002: 162), the message of these poet-prophets can only be taught in a medium of expression understood by the learner. Despite their status as outcasts and their enforced shame, these mystics’ connection with Divinity is evidenced by the limitlessness of their inner apprehension of reality and the nakedness of their thoughts that are unconstrained and open enough to conduct the spiritual experiences of their souls and convert them into a rhythm of thought that in turn becomes poetic creation. Although the words used are part of everyday language and although they are transmitted via the senses, they point towards a spiritual realm: “incarnational language might be defined as ordinary words that resonate with the senses as they aim for the stars” (Norris qtd. in Clark).

Incarnation and ingestion

Valuable literary creation is also depicted as being part of these prophets’ physical bodies, since “poetry at the highest spiritual register [becomes] an expression of the whole body” (Ginsberg qtd. in Gelpi 2015: 101). This connection to the otherworldly enables its creator to offer it for consumption as spiritual nourishment. This is indicative of a strong link with the Christian understanding of Incarnation, for during the Last Supper, Jesus Christ encouraged the apostles to eat bread, in commemoration of his own incarnate presence. Similarly, the lyrical voice of “Howl” presents a holy poem, urging readers to consume it in order to embody the spirit of life.

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. (Matthew 26:26)

with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years (Ginsberg 1956: 20)

The foundation and inspiration for this spiritual communion with divinity was found in the symbol of the Eucharist, in which Christ is both

substantially and eternally present. Considering that “bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of the priest” (“Presence of Jesus”), Ginsberg’s analogy allows for the poem to be understood as bread and for the poet to assume not the role of the priest, but of the Messiah himself. In addition, the multiple repetitions at the beginning of each line of “Howl”, known as anaphora in the field of rhetoric (“Anaphora”), may symbolize the repetitive lifting up of the wine and bread during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, known as anaphora as well. In Allen Ginsberg’s rendition of the incarnation of spiritual existence into artistic ingestion that is described as being as physical as the body itself, the poem is not just taken out of the human body, but butchered out of it, leading to the image of animal sacrifice and ritualistic offering. This way, the reader of the poem may metaphorically eat the flesh of these characters. The flesh becomes holy and immune to putrefaction, as it re-embodies the Divine spirit.

Incarnation and jazz

The “rhythm of thought” (Ginsberg 1956: 20) maintained by the repetitions of the poem is also in close connection to another variation of the poetic play with the concept of incarnation that expands the artistic horizon to include not only poetry, but also music. Before analyzing Allen Ginsberg’s specific connection between spirituality and its jazz incarnation, I would like to mention a few reasons for which the author and his generation were particularly interested in jazz. While the meaning of the *Beat* Generation fathered by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs undoubtedly leads to the idea of beat down, tired and beatific, saintly, it can also be understood in terms of musical beat and hence linked to the growing 1950s American jazz culture. Although the latter was associated primarily with African Americans, it offered “an anti-establishment art form [that was] propelled into America’s consciousness as an expression of oppressed groups instead of a black art inaccessible to whites” (Gibson 2007: 56-57), becoming “the language of the hipsters” (Maynard 1993: 201) and thus the ultimate expression of freedom and difference that resonated with the minds of the marginalized members of the Beat Generation. Furthermore, bebop was a form of jazz the rhythm variations of which imitated natural speech and encouraged spontaneity and improvisation which was adopted as a key element of composition in the works of the Beats, as it allowed for an uncensored, uninterrupted pouring of feelings. In the words of Jack Kerouac, “[s]ketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician)” (qtd. in Gelpi 2015: 99).

Inspired perhaps by this analogy, Ginsberg’s rhythmic technique for “Howl” can be said to be drawn from jazz. The poet famously admitted to

having created the lines of “Howl” according to the length of his own breath: “Ideally each line of Howl is a single breath unity. My breath is long – that’s the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath” (Ginsberg, “Ginsberg’s Notes”). Both of the words “inspiration” and “breath” are connected to the Latin *Spiritus* and are turned into concrete objects of existence. Consequently, in order to be inspired, the poet has to let himself be inhabited by the spirit that is made incarnate through his body and the use of words. When the spirit embodied by physical breath loses its power, the words stop and the line of the poem is concluded. Ginsberg’s “physical-mental” characterization also leads to the concept of incarnation, as it involves the paradoxical coexistence of absence and presence of transcendence. Similarly, a jazz musician, a saxophone player is also confined by the breath unit, and has to exercise great breath control in order to keep a particular rhythm. When running out of breath, “instead of pausing to inhale, he should start again to the ‘dadada’ riff” (Gibson 2007: 67), which in the case of “Howl” is the repetition of the first part of each line. Therefore, “who” in the first part, “Moloch” in the second part and “I’m with you in Rockland” in the third part act as the poet’s riff, “repeating notes, combining and varying to create something new” (Gibson 2007: 68). The varied rhythm of bebop, the improvisation that was essential to it, as well as the riffing technique help Ginsberg adjust his poem according to the rules of jazz, converting what would normally be poetic incarnation into musical incarnation.

The word “jazz” is mentioned five times throughout the poem and twice it is linked directly to incarnation.

who barreled down the highways of the past journeying to each
other’s hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz
incarnation (Ginsberg 1956: 17)

and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn
shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked
mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone
cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio (Ginsberg 1956:
20)

In the first instance, the suffering of those described is linked to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sake of humanity through the mentioning of Golgotha, the hill on which the Christian Messiah was crucified. After the physical death of their bodies, these mystics are reincarnated into jazz musicians who blow a saxophone cry expressing the suffering of America that finds its voice in the phrase uttered by Christ before he died according to

Matthew: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (27:46). The word “shivered” turned into a transitive verb renders the image of uncontrollable shaking. Just as the earth quaked after the death of Christ, the powerful cry of the saxophone convulses the whole country “for love”. What is more, the original use of the Hebrew phrase reinforces the link with the Scripture, and implicitly with the sanctity and the role of salvation of these musical spiritual beings incarnate and reincarnate in an analogy with Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the experience of God can be felt incarnate by means of the poetic language employed in Allen Ginsberg's “Howl”, since this language is portrayed as an intermediary between an immortal Divinity and the finite perception of mortal beings and it contains gaps meant to become embodied with the very sensation of existence. Moreover, in an analogy with the Last Supper, Ginsberg assumes the role of the Christian Messiah in presenting the poem as an artistic Eucharist that allows for spiritual nourishment by means of its materialization and subsequent (meta)physical consumption.

The concept of incarnation is then brought from the realm of poetry to that of music, while retaining the essential matter-spirit simultaneity by means of the spontaneous, uninterrupted construction of the poem as a series of breath-units, turning the poet-performer into a saxophone player who inhales only at the riff, repeating the same notes at the beginning of each line to establish the rhythm and continuing with endless improvisation and variation. The howling cry of this saxophone is paralleled to Christ's last words on the cross, further stressing the sacrificial element, but also the redeeming quality of incarnation. Therefore, the play between the Christian understanding of Incarnation and the artistic depiction of language, of the poetic body and of musical creation transforms the poetic voice of “Howl” into a savior whose presence and creation strongly point to the incarnation of inspiration and thus of spirit.

Notes

¹ All Biblical quotes are taken from “King James Bible Online”.

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