3. Modernism and the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg

3.1 Introduction

In your study your problem will be to get from the Modernists to the Beats. – William Everson

This chapter will explore the proposed double-sided relationship between the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg and the modernist movement. It will firstly investigate the Beat reaction against the institutionalised form of high modernism, with its emphasis on impersonality and intellect. The first section of this chapter will therefore set out to define the nature of the literary situation which Ginsberg's Beat poetry reacted against by discussing the literary status quo in post-war America, as well as the nature of Ginsberg's reaction to this.

Following this, the discussion will turn to the ways in which this rejection involves a simultaneous assimilation of early avant-garde modernist aesthetics suited to the spontaneity, individuality, experimentalism and spirituality of the Beat project. In this section of the chapter, the movements of imagism and surrealism, identified as influential in Ginsberg's Beat poetics, will be discussed. The section contains theoretical discussions of the movements in question, together with evaluations and discussions of specific poems from the volumes identified in chapter 1. The aim of these discussions is to determine the influence and relevance of these two modernist movements regarding Ginsberg's Beat poetry, indicating the way in which Beat poetry eclectically assimilated less institutionalised developments within the modernist movement to counteract the perceived hegemony of high modernism.

3.2 The reaction against modernist poetics

The Revolution has been accomplished: noble has been changed to no bull. – William Carlos Williams

Holmes (1981:5) proposes the following literary definition of the Beat movement:

I take this movement to include all those poets and writers who would agree, either whole-heartedly or with some minor reservations, with William Carlos Williams’
reaction to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* [sic]. Williams felt that it would set American poetry back by twenty years ... I take this movement to embrace all those writers who rejected the formalism, conservatism and "classicism" that Eliot's influence grafted on American writing; who went back to essential sources - in our national experience and in our earlier literature - to be renewed.

Despite the fact that this definition of the Beat movement is somewhat vague, it does point out an important characteristic of the Beat movement: its relationship to the modernist literary tradition in America. The historian Rebecca Solnit (quoted in Charters, 1993:586) posits a similar argument in her comment that

>a poetic rebellion was taking place. Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot had established a modernist tradition of erudite, impersonal poetry .... There was no single reaction against that orthodoxy, but there were some widespread tendencies - the assertion of the personal, a grounding in the details of everyday life, and a desire to return to a genuine, American speech .... Walt Whitman's free-wheeling rhapsodies and William Carlos Williams' taut, lucid verse became the foundation for a new tradition, in which Allen Ginsberg could write about supermarkets and homosexual encounters ... in which humour and imperfection, confusion and confession were possible.

Everson (1981:186) also presents the basic contention that the literature of the Beats was "a frontal attack ... on Modernist poets and New Critics", and regards this as a "re-enactment of the archetypal conflict between the Dionysian impulse toward the primitive, the ecstatic, and the unconscious, and the Apollonian tendency towards culture, education and the ego". Similarly, George and Starr (1985:206) point out that the Beats reacted against the classicism, formality and objectivity promulgated by the New Critics.

The nature of the modernist tradition that became institutionalised in America has already been touched upon, and will be discussed further in this section. If one were to choose one text to represent this tradition, it would undoubtedly be T. S. Eliot's *The waste land* (1922), and this is what the Beats aimed their criticism at. The Beats felt that high modernist art presented a one-sided perspective, since it only focused on the decay and chaos of Western civilization, the futility and fragility of human existence, the impossibility of coherence and meaning, and spiritual barrenness (Pritchard, 1993:320). Beat literature shares this sense of the decay of civilisation, but the crucial difference resides in its attempt to create, present and re-establish a positive vision and new spirituality.
This key difference becomes clearly visible when one compares the ultimate poetic statements of the respective movements: T. S. Eliot's *The waste land* (1922) and Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' (1956). Whereas *The waste land* expresses the irrevocable sense of loss and spiritual barrenness in detached and objective terms, ‘Howl’ becomes an impassioned plea for something to believe in. In this, one may already find indications of one of the major differences between high modernism and the Beat movement.

The stylistic characteristics of high modernist poetry are very much indebted to some of the central assumptions institutionalised by Eliot. For example, Eliot refused to accept “either that poetry consisted in the use of emotive language, or that it was simply a vehicle for communicating the author’s experience to the reader” (Robey, 1986:80). Eliot’s view was that “[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (quoted in Robey, 1986:80). This “escape from emotion” produces a style of poetry characterised by objectivity, detachment, intellectualism and scholasticism. It is also related to Eliot’s idea of the objective correlative: “The only way of expressing emotion is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion.” (Eliot, quoted in Abrams, 1993:136.)

Eliot’s poetics thus espouses the notion of an outer correlative of inner feelings that is definite, impersonal and concretely descriptive, and is opposed to the direct statement of feelings in poetry. This aspect is also relevant to the high value given to formalism in Eliot’s poetry. Precise, refined, erudite and dispassionate expression and construction were of the utmost importance (York, 1996:484), as were clarity and concreteness. As Eliot put it, “[l]anguage in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified” (quoted in York, 1996:485).

A further important aspect is the highly intellectual, academic and complex nature of high modernist poetry. In another of his famous comments, Eliot stated that
become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning (Eliot, quoted in York, 1996:484).

Thus precision and refinement of feeling as well as of expression are intimately fused. Precise, disciplined articulation of feeling in an objective way becomes one of the foremost tasks of language, in order to clear up not only imprecision of expression, but also imprecision of feeling. As Eliot (1963:203) writes in *Four Quartets*:

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And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.
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The notion of an escape from personality is another important aspect of Eliot's poetics, since his poetry constitutes an attempt to escape from the self, into a realm that is more impersonal and objective.

New Criticism in America is very much indebted to Eliot, and may in fact be seen as a fusion of the British critic I. A. Richards' work and that of Eliot. Like Eliot, the New Critics regarded the notions of personality and emotionality as unacceptable in poetry. To this end, they developed the concepts of the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy. They regarded the poem as an object, in which the author's experience and intentions do not determine the function, meaning or effect – contrary to the intentional fallacy (Robey, 1986:81). The affective fallacy, according to the New Critics, is the fallacy that poetry consists in the emotive use of language (Robey, 1986:82).

The New Critics, like Eliot, demanded impersonality, objectivity and ironic detachment from poetry. As George and Starr (1985:206) state, for the New Critics "the poem was to be analyzed as an object that was independent of the author's life and background, an object that employed particular means to achieve particular effects". They therefore also placed a high premium on the formal aspects of the poem, and expected qualities such as erudition, coherence, and complexity from poetry. The New Critics were concerned with the formal properties of the poem as
poem, in particular with its success in reconciling opposites in a coherent, structured whole. The New Critics asserted that

the essential property of poetry consists in the reconciliation of harmonization of opposites; that this takes the form of an objective organization of the objective meanings of words; and that although the same organization cannot be found in other forms of discourse, it nonetheless contributes to our knowledge and experience of ourselves and the world (Robey, 1986:84).

Certain formal aspects, such as the use of paradox, simile, metaphor, analogy, rhythm, rhyme and irony are the ways in which this reconciliation is structurally effected.

The reconciliation of opposites into a harmonious whole points to another tendency to be found in New Criticism: the emphasis on balance, the dislike of excess, and the notion of the poem as presenting a balanced insight which has a certain value for understanding the world. It has to be noted, however, that this value is often subtly assessed from an extremely conservative point of view, embodying the mainstream political, social, moral and spiritual norms of the time.

This was the literary climate in post-war America that Beat poetry reacted against. Ginsberg flaunted almost every convention institutionalised by the conjunction between high modernist poetics and New Criticism. His poetry is aggressively personal, often highly emotional, and almost always excessive in style and content. Furthermore, the explicit depictions of homosexuality, crime and drug use contained in some of his poetry are certainly not in accordance with the relatively conservative notions of moral balance and health espoused by most of the New Critics. As far as Ginsberg’s style of writing is concerned, it is unrestrained, rhapsodic, excessively emotional and declarative, without the delicate intellectual nuances of construction that interested the New Critics.

It is therefore no surprise that the initial response to Ginsberg’s poetry was extremely negative. For example, a 1957 review written by Rumaker (1984:36-40) clearly displays the pervasive influence of high modernist standards and the New Critical approach. In this review, ‘Howl’ is criticised on several typically New Critical grounds. For example, Rumaker (1984:36) states that “the feelings are not precise (are an onrush of emotional bulk) and therefore the words, the language cannot be precise”.


Specifically, he says that the overwhelming anger of the poem "bears the strain of a descriptive and nonexact vocabulary to define it" (Rumaker, 1984:36). He further believes that it is "sparseness that's needed here, to let the poem emerge from its adjectival obfuscation" (Rumaker, 1984:37). In short, Rumaker (1984:36) criticises the poem because "it does not contain itself".

Rumaker (1984:36) also regards the poem as corrupted by "sentimentality, bathos, Buddha and hollow talk of eternity". Furthermore, he feels that the poet has not "broken through" (Rumaker, 1984:37) to the assimilation of contradictions in the poem, and therefore he also feels that the value of the poem is negligible. In his opinion, "[t]his confusion, this gibberish, is Satan" (Rumaker, 1984:37), thereby revealing the implicit assumption that order, sparseness, clarity and harmony in poetry is equivalent to some kind of moral good, which 'Howl', with its excesses, rhapsodic tone, intense emotion and unordered feeling obviously contradicts.

Rumaker (1984:38) reveals the conservative assumptions by which the value of the poem is judged. Commenting on the religious and Buddhist slant of the poem, he writes that

Buddha is for the Indians. It is not our way. We have our own redskinned terrors to come to grips with, spectres tho they be ... you cannot have religion and art ... You can't pine for eternity and Buddhist visions and hope also to make good poems ... Art does not concern itself with systems of religion – or systems of any kind.

Not only does this reveal the conservatism behind the value judgement, it also reveals the New Critical notion that the poem is only a textual and formal artefact, and that it should be judged as a contained literary work, and not in other terms such as spirituality (or politics or psychology or sociology, as the case may be).55

55 Like the Russian Formalists, the New Critics did make an invaluable contribution to literary theory, by moving away from the positivist style of literary criticism, which consistently evaluated literature in terms of external factors, such as the author's psychology or the historical context. Instead, they wanted to study literature as literature, focusing on the formal properties that distinguish literature from other forms of discourse. The fact that the positive contributions of New Criticism are not really focused on in this section is not intended to imply that there is no merit in this approach, because there most certainly is. The point is that they contributed to a certain literary climate in post-war America, which the Beats felt the need to react against. Therefore this section mainly focuses on the aspects that the Beats denounced, and evaluates these aspects from the perspective of the Beat ethos.
‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) is a deliberate reaction against the stylised, objective, constrained and impersonal poetics of the high modernist ideal, validated by the New Critical school of literary criticism. It contains many autobiographical instances, and is characterised by its intensely personal style. The first section contains descriptions of the life of Ginsberg and his friends, and in it one finds explicit descriptions of sex, crime and drug use, presented as a reaction against the context of a society which lacks any real meaning, spirituality and compassion. Within this context, extreme acts become not only a revolt against and an indictment of the emptiness of society, but also an affirmation of the intense joy of life and the search for a new spirituality. The language is deliberately excessive and impulsive, often a combination of biblical and colloquial language and rhythms, and frequently what would be called obscene.\(^{56}\)

Ginsberg (1984a:78) has explicitly reacted against the negative response that Beat writing received from the New Critics. In a rather vitriolic letter to John Hollander he writes that it is

> incredible after 2 decades of new criticism & the complete incompetence to evaluate & recognise anything new ... All the universities been fucking dead horse for decades and this is Culture!? Yet prosidy & conceptions of poetry been changing for half a century already and what a columbia instructor can recognise in Pound he can’t see in Olson’s method, what he can see in Lorca or Appolinaire he can’t see in Howl – it’s fantastic. You call this education? I call it absolutely brainwashed bullshit. Not saying that either Olson or Howl are Lorca or Pound – I’m saying there’s a recognizable continuity of method – yet I have to listen to people giving me doublethink gobbledygook about why don’t I write poems with form, construction, something charming and carefully made.

Ginsberg’s comment on the continuity of method is central to the argument of this chapter. He clearly points out that Beat poetry reacted against a certain tradition, but he also points out that there is a discernible and important continuity between methods, in this case from other, uninstitutionalised modernist movements. It is thus necessary to pay attention to the way in which artistic change assimilates elements

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\(^{56}\) The implications of these preliminary comments on ‘Howl’ will be worked out in more detail in section 3.2. For now, it will suffice to simply point out the dimensions in which this poem reacts against the high modernist and New Critical standard.
from previous developments, simultaneous with the rejection of certain institutionalised and stagnant traditions. It is to these possible continuities between Ginsberg's Beat poetry and some developments within the modernist movement that the following section will turn its attention.

3.3 The integration of modernist poetics in the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg

For the purpose of exploring some of these possible continuities the modernist movements of imagism and surrealism were chosen. These two movements are oppositional in many ways, since they are examples of what has been regarded as the two opposing strains of modernism, already discussed in section 2.3.5. According to this distinction, imagism, as an example of the abstractionist strain of modernism, is obviously in conflict with surrealism, which is seen as part of the more expressionist strain. However, as the rest of this chapter will show, Ginsberg's Beat poetry accommodates both approaches, and may even be seen as presenting a synthesis between the two. This synthesis is effected by developing some of the possible correspondences between the two modes. Of course, this kind of synthesis of a more perceptual, reality-based approach with a more personal, imaginative, intense, spiritual and surreal approach is typical of Beat poetry's focus on the holistic nature of experience, and the belief that real experience forms the basis of spiritual experience. Also, both approaches value spontaneity, another quality which is characteristic of Beat poetry. Molesworth (1984:288) points out the nature, effect and aims of this synthesis:

Ginsberg's poetry has developed out of an aesthetic of immediacy and produced a syntax that mediates between a flat uniform perception and a swirling, flashing registry of states of consciousness in which perceptions are constantly disarranged, even deranged, by fissures or leaps in awareness.

Thus Ginsberg's poetry of immediacy and spontaneity develops from a perceptive immediacy to an immediacy of consciousness, a process in which the ideas of imagism and surrealism are reconciled.

The following sections will devote their attention to the influence of the movements of imagism and surrealism in Ginsberg's poetry, based on the comments already made.
The discussions will contain presentations of the theoretical assumptions and poetic practice of the respective movements, together with possible connections and influences between the movements and Ginsberg's poetics. Integrated with this, Ginsberg's Beat poetry will be discussed in terms of the respective artistic movements.

3.3.1 Imagism

Imagism started out as one of the poetic vogues which proliferated in the early modernist phase. In this sense, it should be seen as nothing more than the deliberate rebellion of a small and exclusive group of poets against vague (late-) Romantic notions of poetry which produced a contemporary practice of poetry which they perceived to be "a horrible agglomerate compost, not minted, most of it not even baked, all legato, a doughy mess of third-hand Keats, Wordsworth, heaven knows what, fourth hand Elizabethan sonority blunted, half-melted, lumpy" (Pound, quoted in Jones, 1972:14).

Instead, the imagist poets, under the initial leadership of Ezra Pound, strove after a style of poetry which would abandon traditionally acceptable poetic materials and versification, and would be free to appropriate any subject matter, to create its own rhythms using everyday speech, and above all, to present the poem in the form of a clear, hard and concentrated image (Abrams, 1993:88). In the characteristically frank words of Pound (in Eliot, 1964:12):

As to Twentieth century poetry ... it will, I think, move against poppy cock, it will be harder and saner ... It will be as much like granite as it can be, and its force will lie in its truth, its interpretative power ... It will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.

Considering these introductory comments, one might justifiably ask what common ground exists between imagist poetics and the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg. Pound's poetics of concrete objectivity, free from "emotional slither", "rhetorical din", "luxurious riot" and "painted adjectives" superficially seems to be in direct conflict with Ginsberg's poetry, which is invariably highly subjective, emotional and concerned with spirituality, expressed in language which may be described as extravagant, to say the least.
However, the fact remains that Ginsberg himself has acknowledged the influence of Pound and Williams, who both (in different ways) developed the imagist aesthetic, an influence which is also indicated by several critics. Docherty (1995:199) believes that Ginsberg belongs to “that neo-modernist grouping which derives its poetics from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams”, and Simpson (1984:19) states that some of the poems in the volume *Empty mirror* are “close imitations of Williams”. However, both these critics are careful to point out that Ginsberg’s poetry also moves beyond imagist poetics, in particular in its assimilation of the subjective and the emotional into a rhapsodic style. The question with which this section needs to concern itself then becomes simply to determine in which respects Ginsberg’s poetry assimilates elements from imagist poetics. In order to clarify this issue, the first part of this section will provide a brief exposition of some of Ginsberg’s ideas and influences which are relevant to or echo his appropriation of imagist aesthetics. In this respect, this section may be regarded as an extension of the discussion of the characteristics of and influences on Ginsberg’s poetry, presented in sections 2.2.4 and 2.2.5.

### 3.3.1.1 Echoes of imagist aesthetics in Ginsberg’s poetics

There are several aspects of Ginsberg’s poetics which are, directly or indirectly, related to imagist ideas. The most important of these are the influence of Pound’s ideogrammic method and the haiku, Ginsberg’s interpretation of the artistic method of Cézanne, and lastly the influence of William Carlos Williams.

#### 3.3.1.1.1 The haiku and Pound’s ideogrammic method

Géfin (1984:272) calls the central method of modernist poetry juxtapositional, ideogrammic or paratactic. This mode of writing is especially evident in the Chinese ideogrammic method of the haiku, where close observations of natural and material images are juxtaposed in order to convey an immaterial relationship (Portugés, 1984b:153). In Géfin’s (1984:272) view, this forms the basis of Pound’s imagist theory, where concrete images are juxtaposed without any connectives to create...

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57 The volume *Empty mirror* was published after *Howl and other poems*, but mainly contains poems written before those in the latter volume.
sensory pictures which will fall into particular relational coherence. Ginsberg, to a large extent, appropriates this method, and refers to it as his "elliptical" mode of composition, strongly influenced not only by Pound's poetics, but also by the haiku.

Ginsberg's (1984b:81) major poetic problem at the time of writing 'Howl' was how to sustain the long line without it lapsing into prose. To this end he appropriated the style of the haiku, which he defines as "objective images written down outside mind; the result is inevitable mind sensation of relations. Never try to write of relations themselves, just the images which are all that can be written down on the subject" (quoted in Gefin, 1984:276). In Ginsberg's poetry this takes the form of "natural inspiration that keeps it moving, disparate thinks put down together, shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen jukebox - abstract haikus sustain the mystery and put iron poetry back into the line" (Ginsberg, 1984b:81).

The long line is thus supported by seemingly incongruous, juxtaposed images, often consisting of sensory imagery. From the haiku and Pound's ideogrammic method, Ginsberg then seems to have inherited the importance attached to juxtaposition, as well as to perception and sensation, in particular as far as concrete, everyday experience is concerned. However, as will become apparent later, these concerns are integrated into a poetics that is much more subjective, personal, emotional and transcendental than Pound's or that of the haiku.

3.3.1.1.2 Ginsberg's poetics and Cézanne's method

Ginsberg's interpretation of the postimpressionist artist Paul Cézanne's method is constructed to support his theory of the juxtapositional force of the haiku, and therefore it is not particularly relevant whether his interpretation is "correct". Rather, what is of significance is the fact that his intuitions and thoughts about Cézanne's techniques inspired him to investigate and formulate possibilities for his own poetry. Ginsberg noted that in Cézanne's works visual structuring was based on the "juxtaposition of one color against another color" (Ginsberg, in Clark, 1970:141). From this the idea came to him that "by the unexplainable, unexplained non-perspective line, that is, juxtaposition of one word against another, a gap between

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58 Other aspects of Pound's imagist aesthetics will be discussed in more detail in section 3.2.1.2. Here it will suffice to point out the importance attached to the juxtaposition of images.
two words” would be created “which the mind would fill in with the sensation of experience” (Ginsberg, in Clark, 1970:141-142). Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:142) also points out the similarity between this technique and that of the haiku, where “you have two distinct images, set side by side without drawing a connection, without drawing a logical connection between them: the mind fills in this ... this space”.

Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:143) relates the flash in which the mind makes this connection to Cézanne’s concept of the petite sensation, which he goes on to link to “the satori, perhaps, that the Zen haikuists would speak of ... the hair standing on end or the hackles rising whatever it is, visceral thing” (Ginsberg, in Clark, 1970:143).

The basic idea is that the artist should not be concerned with photographically recreating nature, but that he should rather refine his perception to paint his momentary emotions (sensations) in response to these perceptions (Portugés, 1984b:146). Cézanne also seemed to indicate that these petites sensations were more than mere sensations. These moments also constitute an experience of the Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus (the All-powerful Father, Eternal God). The petite sensation is therefore a heightened moment of perception, in which the perception becomes a mystical experience (Portugés, 1984b:150).

Juxtaposition here becomes a method of creating a gap between two visual images where the individual experience of the moment is intuitively contained, leading on to a mystical experience of totality, wholeness and spirituality. As can be surmised, the aim of the juxtapositional method which Ginsberg discerned in Cézanne, is therefore not merely to connect different sense experiences, but to create “verbal constructions which express the true gaiety & excess of Freedom ... by means of spontaneous irrational juxtaposition of sublimely related fact” (Ginsberg, quoted in Géfin, 1984:277).

Ginsberg’s idiosyncratic interpretation and assimilation of Cézanne’s methods and beliefs thus also lead him to the crucial importance of juxtaposition, to which is added an emphasis on the spontaneous intuition that creates a momentary insight. In Cézanne’s technique Ginsberg also found a way of explicitly connecting the juxtapositional method with a more transcendental and spiritual approach, something which is explicitly present in the haiku, but more latent in Pound’s imagist aesthetics.
3.3.1.1.3 The influence of William Carlos Williams

Ginsberg’s early poetry was written in a style that was a close imitation of sixteenth and seventeenth century poets like Marvell and Wyatt (Géfin, 1984:274). In 1948, after his expulsion from Columbia University, he sent some of these poems to William Carlos Williams for comments. Williams sent them back with the verdict: “In this mode, perfection is basic, and these are not perfect” (quoted in Géfin, 1984:274). Ginsberg then became interested in Williams’ poetics of objectivity and particularity, and attempted the same style of writing, arranging lines according to emotional and breath patterns, focusing on details and particulars, presenting material rather than reworking symbolic implications (see Ginsberg, 1983 for an extensive discussion). These influences are most obvious in the collection Empty mirror, and are assimilated within a larger paradigm in the poems from Howl and other poems, as well as later volumes. However, there is an even more important influence running through from Williams, and this has to do with the integration of American speech rhythms into poetry (Ginsberg, 1984b:80). As Ginsberg puts it, he realised that Williams was

hearing with raw ears. The sound, pure sound and rhythm – as it was spoken around him, and he was trying to adapt his poetry rhythms out of the actual talk rhythms he heard in the place that he was, rather than metronome or sing-song archaic literary rhythms he would hear in a place inside his head from having read other writings (quoted in Géfin, 1984:274).

Ginsberg (quoted in Tytell, 1979:97) also says of Williams’ poetry that it

was exactly identical with speech, the highest speech, but absolutely identical, rhythmically and syntactically. And then I suddenly realized that if you began right where you are, with your own speech, then obviously you would have to create a whole new world of speech, that had never been written down before, which was what he was doing and what anybody could do.

He also realised that it was possible to create a form identical to content, not imposed on content, so that the poem became an organic whole, spontaneously conceived and spoken.
These three aspects, namely the attention to everyday particulars, the incorporation of a spontaneous speech rhythm and sound into poetry and the notion of form and content as part of an organic whole, constitute the bulk of Ginsberg’s inheritance from Williams. It incorporates their shared revolt against high modernist poetics, as well as the emphasis that both placed on spontaneity. However, Ginsberg took Williams’ poetics only as a basis upon which he built his own poetics. He felt that his personal body rhythms and breath were different from that of Williams; instead of Williams’ short, terse lines, Ginsberg tended towards what he has called a “Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath” (Ginsberg, 1984b:80), an extended, ecstatic, excited outpouring rather than the concise containment characterising Williams’ poetry:

My breath is long – that’s the Measure, one physical and mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath. It probably bugs Williams now, but it’s a natural consequence, my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-dailytalk short breath. I get to mouthe more madly this way. (Ginsberg, 1984b:81.)

In interview with Clark (1970:136), Ginsberg has further emphasised this aspect, stating that “what it boils down to is this, it’s my movement, my feeling is for a big long clanky statement”.

To sustain these long lines Ginsberg turned to the idea of spontaneous juxtaposition, where the haiku, Cézanne’s method and Pound and Williams’ imagist methods all played a crucial role. The connection between Ginsberg and the imagist approach then seems to be enforced in several direct and indirect ways, and becomes apparent in many of the characteristics of Beat poetry discussed earlier, such as the emphasis on the concrete and everyday, the use of everyday speech rhythms, the movement from the concrete to the spiritual, and so forth. The following discussion of imagist poetics and Ginsberg’s Beat poetry will supplement these preliminary comments.

59 Although Williams cannot be regarded as a purely imagist poet, his (early) poetry assimilates and develops many of the characteristics of imagist poetry within a particularly American context, as should be apparent from the discussion in this section.
3.3.1.2 Imagist tendencies and Ginsberg's Beat poetry

Reality is a question
of realizing how real
the world is already – Allen Ginsberg –

This section will present a discussion of the characteristics of imagist poetry, combined with a comparison of these characteristics to selected examples of Ginsberg's Beat poetry. The aim is not to prove that Ginsberg is an imagist poet, or that his Beat poetry may be regarded as imagist poetry, but rather to indicate how imagist ideas were assimilated into Ginsberg's Beat poetics.

Imagism was a concerted poetic movement that developed under the influence of (among others) Ezra Pound in the early years of the twentieth century. While critics are divided on its actual contribution to the development of modernist poetry, most agree that imagism may be regarded as the crucial initiating movement of modernist poetry, reacting as it did against comfortable literary assumptions and traditions (Monroe, 1992:30; Pratt, 1992a:75; Rodway, 1992:96 and Harmer, 1975:106). This radical break with convention created a new set of possibilities for poetry, and in this respect the influence of imagism is still felt in contemporary poetry – particularly American poetry (Pratt, 1992b:1-3, 8 and Harmer, 1975:190).

In essence, imagism refers to a style of poetry in which the lucid, austere and precise presentation of an image is of the utmost importance. This presentation is usually accomplished both concretely and visually by the use of juxtaposition, highly descriptive words, and new rhythms in simple language on no prescribed subject matter (Kruger, 1993:32). The traditional forced rhythms are discarded in favour of a rhythm which is inherent to the image itself. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the immediacy of a feeling or experience, filtered through the perspective of the poet. The individual consciousness is therefore very prominent (Rodway, 1992:100). At the same time there is a diminished authorial presence in imagist poetry, because,

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60 See Rodway (1992) for an extensive discussion of the historical and bibliographical detail of the development of the movement.
61 Of course, there are also critics who evaluate the role of imagist poetry more negatively, like Winters (1992), who states that imagism had little merit or lasting value, apart from its contribution to metrical innovation.
paradoxically, imagism strives towards a more objective style of poetry. The image which is presented is also not merely a sensory experience, but constitutes a complex heterogeneous form in which image becomes fused with emotion as well as intellect. Ultimately, the image is pure experience in a condensed form which is completely dissociated from temporal and spatial boundaries. All of these general characteristics are succinctly paraphrased in Pound's three principles of Imagist poetry (in Eliot, 1964:3):

1. Direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.

These assumptions initially usually took the poetic form of a short and intense one-image poem, but small poems like these could also form the building blocks for larger poems in a kind of stream-of-consciousness style where internal states of mind are conveyed by the rapid association of external verbal images (Pratt, 1992b:4-8). It is particularly in these later developments that the real impact and potential of imagist poetics becomes apparent.

Ginsberg (1965) has acknowledged his affinity with some of these aspects, and these resemblances will be discussed in this section, together with the discussion of the theoretical elements of imagism.

3.3.1.2.1 The image: concrete, juxtapositional and complex

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images ... – Allen Ginsberg

Since the concept of the image is central to the understanding of imagism, and because it is a concept which has a distinctive meaning within the movement, it is necessary to explain what Pound and his contemporaries meant by the image. According to Pound (in Eliot, 1964:4), an image "is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". It is the presentation of a single sense experience (usually visual, and always concrete) condensed in a moment of time, that brings with it the intellectual and emotional connotations entangled in that
moment. It compresses time, in order to snatch a fragment from within the constantly changing flow of experience and imbue it with some kind of significance and permanence outside the limits of time and space (Pratt, 1992b:1, 12).

Imagist poetry is strictly concrete, without abstraction or explanation, because “[abstraction] dulls the image ... the natural object is always the adequate symbol” (Pound, in Eliot, 1964:5). Imagist poetry is thus characterised by both concreteness and immediacy rather than abstraction and reflection (Monroe, 1992:25 and Harmer, 1975:45). Despite this concrete nature of imagist poems, there is “a strong sense of the abstract caught in the concrete” (Jones, 1972:31). As Pound (in Jones, 1972:33) puts it, the image is a recording of “the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective”. For this reason, the image always contains a certain measure of tension between subjectivity and objectivity; between the external object and the internal state of mind (Pratt, 1992b:10). Monroe (1992:26) makes this duality of imagist poetry clear:

> It looks out more eagerly than in; it becomes objective. The term ‘exteriority’ has been applied to it, but this is incomplete. In presenting the concrete object or the concrete environment, whether these be beautiful or ugly, it seeks to give more precisely the emotion arising from them ...

The image is the concise visual representation of the totality of immediate experience – it does not depend upon convention or association. It is like a spontaneous and instantaneous concrete equation for a subjective emotion (Pratt, 1992b:10). Therefore it is also not decorative, but is rather the very core of the poetic experience and expression (Pratt, 1992a:78), what F. S. Flint has called “the resonant heart of an exquisite moment” (quoted in Harmer, 1975:163). Ultimately, the idea of the image can be paraphrased in Pound’s “the image is not an idea” (in Jones, 1972:37) or William Carlos Williams’ dictum of “no ideas but in things” (in Tomlinson, 1976:133). The imagist notion of the image is inextricably linked to the treatment of the image in the haiku and the ideogram, and thus relies very heavily on the juxtapositional method and its metaphoric implications (Pratt, 1992b:7 and Harmer, 1975:155).
The theory of the image is exemplified in a poem such as Pound’s ‘In a station of the metro’, (in Allison et al., 1983:963), where the juxtapositional and visual nature of the imagist poem becomes apparent:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

In Ginsberg’s poetry the image is appropriated in a unique way. Instead of the imagist notion of the one-image poem, one finds a chain of images connected within a larger flow of thought, exemplified in Ginsberg’s long line. The notion of the image, then, is displaced from the typically imagist poetic environment of the short, epigrammatic poem, and placed within a new textual environment. However, it would seem as if the essence of the image remains the same. It is particularly from the juxtapositional and concrete nature of the image that Ginsberg’s Beat poetry draws much inspiration.

As far as the concrete is concerned, Ginsberg’s poetry often incorporates aspects of everyday reality, depicted in concrete terms. The involvement with the everyday has already been discussed as a central characteristic of Beat poetry, and ties in with the concern for subjective experience, and the Beat injunction that poetry be born from the totality of personal experience, honestly expressed in spontaneous speech. However, this subjective experience is often depicted in a concrete way. ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) exemplifies these concerns. In this poem, one finds a mixture of spirituality, emotionality and physicality, with the latter receiving a lot of emphasis. In fact, spiritual and emotional experiences are often described in concrete terms, as the following examples from the poem show (my emphases):

who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall, (L 8)\(^{62}\)

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\(^{62}\) The numbering of the lines of long poems such as ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) is problematic. In the case of this poem, specifically, each “line” is intended as a breath unit, indicated by the use of indented paragraphs. Each of these breath units would be one line, but due to spatial constraints, they need to be printed as paragraphs. Taking this into account, it was decided to number the lines – as is conventional – as they were intended as units. To indicate the lines another convention was followed – indenting the paragraphs using mostly a hanging indent and sometimes a first-line indent.
Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teatead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind, (L 13)

who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night cars, N. C., secret hero of these poems, coxswain and Adonis of Denver – joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses' rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings & especially, secret gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys too, (L 43)

From these three excerpts three important issues become clear: Ginsberg's emphasis on everyday realities, on sensory experience and on the concrete. The everyday reality of Ginsberg's poetry is often drawn from Ginsberg's experiences in underground culture, hence the focus on drugs, sex, poverty and crime. This is very prominent in 'Howl' (CP:126-133), and is one of the reasons that the poem was denigrated when first published. For example, 'Howl' (CP:126-133) explicitly describes both homosexual and heterosexual promiscuous sex:

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,
who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love,
(...)
who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzy of consciousness, (L 36-41)

The above should give an idea of the kind of reality that Ginsberg is depicting in the poem, and this is further supplemented with descriptions of experiences with crime, insanity, suicide, poverty, murder and many other aspects of the excessive underground counterculture lifestyle that the Beats were part of. In this regard, consider the examples quoted earlier, as well as the following:

who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried. (L 55)
who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in
the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street, danced on
broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records on nostalgic
1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the
bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles, (L
58)

In other poems the focus on the everyday reality is more mundane, such as in the
poem 'A strange new cottage in Berkeley' (CP:135):

All afternoon cutting bramble blackberries off a tottering brown fence
under a low branch with its rotten old apricots miscellaneous under the leaves,
fixing the drip in the intricate gut machinery of a new toilet;
found a good coffeepot in the vines by the porch, rolled a big tyre out of the scarlet
bushes, hid my marijuana;

wet the flowers, playing the sunlit water each to each, returning for godly extra drops
for the stringbeans and daisies;
three times walked round the grass and sighed absently; (L 1-7)

There are many other poems in which the details of everyday life, concretely
depicted, are of utmost importance, such as 'Paterson' (CP:40-41), '345 W. 15th St.'
(CP:73-74), 'My Alba' (CP:89) and 'Transcription of organ music' (CP:140-141). The
focus on the concrete details of everyday life is obvious in all of these poems, as is
the importance of sensory experience – particularly the visual. This importance is
also clearly evident in 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139), which consistently focuses on
the visual reality:

The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sank on top of final Frisco peaks,
no fish in that stream, no hermit in those mounts, just ourselves rheumy-eyed
and hung-over like old bums on the river-bank, tired and wily.

Look at the Sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray shadow against the sky, big as
a man, sitting dry on top of a pile of ancient sawdust –
I rushed up enchanted – it was my first sunflower, memories of Blake – my visions –

Harlem

and Hells of the Eastern rivers, bridges clanking Joes Greasy Sandwiches, dead
baby carriages, black treadless tires forgotten and unretreaded, the poem
of the riverbank, condoms & pots, steel knives, nothing stainless, only the dank
muck and the razor-sharp artifacts passing into the past – (L 3-6)

The "poem of the riverbank" is thus made up of all the "razor-sharp artifacts" visually
perceived and described in the poem, again emphasising the crucial importance of
concrete experience. As in the case of the imagists, Ginsberg's poetry scorns abstract intellectualisation, and rather attempts to give through the presentation of physical and concrete images a sense of the whole (physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual) experience linked within these concrete images. This idea is clearly expressed in the poem 'On Burroughs' work' (CP:114):

The method must be purest meat
and no symbolic dressing,
actual visions & actual prisons
as seen then and now.
(...)
A naked lunch is natural to us,
we eat reality sandwiches.
But allegories are so much lettuce.
Don't hide the madness. (L 1-12)

Ginsberg himself points out his debt to the imagists in this regard: "... maybe most important of Pound's moves is a return to the body, a rejoining through speech of the body and mind, after the mind and body had been separated out in poetics since the invention of the printing press" (Ginsberg, 1986:8).

Ginsberg's emphasis on the physical, the concrete and the sensory may then be directly linked to the imagist influence on his poetry. However, as in imagist poetry, the aim is not merely to present a sensory experience, but to present a juxtaposition of concrete experiences that contain within them holistic experiences – Pound's "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". In Ginsberg's case another concern is added: that of spirituality. In his poetry there is a consistent movement from the concrete to a wider context of experience, typically spiritual or emotional. In 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139) the development is from a visual description of the dead sunflower and its grimy surroundings to a mystical apprehension of the totality of experience:

- We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty imageless locomotive,
  we're all golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy naked
  accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the
  sunset, spied on by our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive
  riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown vision. (L 22)
In this poem the containment of the abstract in the concrete is manifested in a rather elaborated manner, which is not clearly imagist. This poem is almost a manifesto of Ginsberg’s idea that true spirituality is to be found in the concrete, the everyday, and the apparently insignificant. This is also the main idea of another manifesto-like poem, ‘Footnote to Howl’ (CP:134). Even though the style is not imagist, the ideas expressed are. The poem is an expression of the belief that holiness or spirituality is to be found in the body, in sensory experience, in concrete reality, no matter how banal or insignificant:

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!
Everyman’s an angel! (L 2-3)

In other poems this characteristic is decidedly more imagist, particularly as far as the juxtapositional nature of imagist poetry is concerned. Ginsberg (1986:7) states that one of the most important inheritances of imagist poetry has been the “ideogram (or juxtaposition of images or jump-cut or montage or association) as parallel to the actual movement of the mind, as a hologram of the movement of the mind”. He then goes on to link this with spirituality. According to him, Pound’s imagist method has provided a method of handling epiphanous moments, satori or kensho as Japanese might say: a method of rendering clear sight into words and preserving the breathing mandala of direct perception of things simultaneously occurring during time of epiphany ... [this] is a successful program for dealing with altered or poignant or penetrating states of consciousness. A practical method of codifying space into language, “Only emotion objectified endures” as Zukofsky and Pound formulated it (Ginsberg, 1986:7).

In ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) this idea is explicitly stated:

who 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 (L 74)

Ginsberg’s Beat poetry thus clearly acknowledges the imagist idea that the juxtaposition of visual images creates a space where the totality of experience becomes tangible. In his case, however, the focus is often on the visionary, the
mystical and the spiritual. This is also the idea that Ginsberg inferred from his involvement with the haiku and with Cézanne’s juxtapositional method (see section 3.2.1.1.2 for a complete discussion of this issue).

Ginsberg has in fact written several poems in the style of the haiku — some rather playful and others in a more serious mood. In ‘Four haiku’ (CP:137) he presents something like

On the porch
in my shorts —
auto lights in the rain.

Here the juxtaposition of the two images is supposed to convey an emotional state, possibly of loneliness and isolation. Rather than describing the abstract emotion, Ginsberg presents two overtly unrelated images juxtaposed, and in the suspended space created between the two images, the emotion becomes apparent. In poems such as these, Ginsberg’s debt to imagist ideas is most apparent, as is also the case in some of his earlier poetry, inspired by William Carlos Williams’ style. A poem such as ‘The bricklayer’s lunch hour’ (CP:4) is typical of this style, focusing on a concrete description with the emphasis on visual experience, and with no abstraction or explanation added:

A small cat walks to him
along the top of the wall. He picks
it up, takes off his cape, and puts it
over the kitten’s body for a moment.
Meanwhile it is darkening as if to rain
and the wind on top of the trees in the
street comes through almost harshly. (L 21-27)

In ‘Havana 1953’ (CP:92-94) the same style is evident:

The night café – 4 A. M.
Cuba Libre 20c:
white tiled squares,
triangular neon lights,
long wooden bar on one side,
a great delicatessen booth
on the other facing the street.
In the center
among the great city midnight drinkers,
by Aldama Palace
on Gómez corner,
white men and women
with standing drums,
mariachis, voice guitars –
drumming on tables,
knives on bottles,
banging on the floor
and on each other,
with wooden clacks,
whistling, howling,
fat women in strapless silk. (L 1-21)

Ginsberg’s debt to Williams’ style is obvious in the brevity, clarity and concreteness of both images and language. His affinity with Williams’ poetics is clear from his belief that Williams’ poetry is a process of “working with perceptions that are indistinguishable from the actual perceptions of our ordinary mind; but which, when recognized, and appreciated consciously, transform the entire feeling of existence to a totally new sympathetic universe” (quoted in Foster, 1992:94-95).

This containment of the totality in a single experience is characteristic of imagist concerns, and is also typical of Ginsberg’s style. It not only connects with imagist ideas, but also with Buddhist approaches. According to Ginsberg (1983:38-39) Williams’ work, for example,

is very similar to Zen-Buddhist mindfulness practice, because it clamps the mind down on objects and brings the practitioner into direct relations with whatever he can find in front of him without making a big deal about it; without satisfying some ego ambition to have something more princely or less painful than what already is ...

That’s the whole point; dealing with this universe. And that was a fantastic discovery; that you can actually make poetry by dealing with this universe instead of creating another one.

However, the examples mentioned here should not be regarded as truly characteristic of Ginsberg’s style. These examples show his experimentation with Williams’ poetics, and are mostly taken from the earlier phase of his Beat writing. In the poetry from the definitive Beat phase, this is adapted into a style uniquely his own. In a poem such as ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) the spiritual and mystical concerns
become more prominent, and the imagist simplicity is incorporated within a larger framework of rushing, tumbling images and language. Here, as said earlier, the juxtaposition of multiple images becomes a way of sustaining Ginsberg's characteristic long line, maintaining the importance of the concrete and everyday images, while simultaneously evoking that space where the totality of experience makes itself felt. For example, the multiple sensory juxtapositions in a line such as

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard tree cemetery dawn, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teashop joyride, neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations on the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind, (L 13)

create the impression of a certain hallucinatory state of mind. Similar chain-like juxtapositions occur in 'Afternoon Seattle' (CP:150):

the birds invade with their cries the skid row alley creeps downtown the ancient jailhouse groans bums snore under the pavement a dark Turkish bath the cornice gapes at midnight Seattle! – department stores full of fur coats and camping equipment, mad noontime businessmen in gabardine coats talking on streetcomers to keep up the structure, I float past, birds cry, (L 12-13)

There are many other poems that exhibit this characteristic of the chain-like juxtaposition of visual images, whereby the flow of experiential moments is encapsulated, such as 'In the baggage room at Greyhound' (CP:153-154) and 'Ready to roll' (CP:159). The above examples should be sufficient to substantiate the point, and therefore these poems will not be discussed in any detail here.

Sometimes the juxtaposition of images is much simpler, and involves the juxtaposition of two words, overtly unrelated, within a long poetic line. 'Howl' (CP:126-133) contains many such examples. One often referred to by Ginsberg himself as exemplary of his juxtapositional method (see Clark, 1970:162) is that of "hydrogen jukebox" (L 15). This is a simple juxtaposition of the two words hydrogen and jukebox, but each word brings with it a vast range of connotations and references. The one has to do with the threat of nuclear war and complete annihilation, while the other is a typically American object of entertainment. Putting these two images together – without explanation – seems logically incongruous, but
somewhere in the mental space created by this juxtaposition the sense or mood of the image is created:

... just as Cézanne doesn’t use perspective lines to create space, but it’s a juxtaposition of one color against another color ... so, I had the idea, perhaps over-refined, that by the unexplainable, unexplained ... juxtaposition of one word against another, a gap between the two words – like the space gap in the canvas – there’d be a gap between the two words which the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence (Ginsberg, in Clark, 1970:142).

This idea underlies similar constructions like “Third Avenue iron dreams” (L 44), “nitroglycerine shrieks” (L 56), or “catatonic piano” (L 105), all from ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133).

In other cases the adaptation of imagist poetics hovers somewhere between the objective and concrete style of Williams and a subjective elaboration of the image. In ‘Transcription of organ music’ (CP:140-141) the first and third stanzas clearly exhibit an imagist influence:

The flower in the glass peanut bottle formerly in the kitchen crooked to take a place in the light,
the closet door opened, because I used it before, it kindly stayed open waiting for me its owner
(...)
The rambler vine climbed up the cottage post, the leaves in the night still where the day had placed them, the animal heads of the flowers where they had arisen to think at the sun (L 1-7)

However, in other parts of the poem, the style tends more towards the elaboration of images, together with subjective comment, than to the objective presentation of single images:

I had a moment of clarity, saw the feeling in the heart of things, walked out to the garden crying.
Saw the red blossoms in the night light, sun’s gone, they had all grown, in a moment, and were waiting stopped in time for the day sun to come and give them ...
Flowers which as in a dream at sunset I watered faithfully not knowing how much I loved them.
I am so lonely in my glory – except they too out there – I looked up – those red bush blossoms beckoning and peering in the window waiting in blind love, their
leaves too have hope and are upturned top flat to the sky to receive – all creation open to receive – the flat earth itself (L 13-16)

Ginsberg’s poetics thus adapts many ideas surrounding the particularly imagist notion of the image. The focus on the concrete, the everyday and the sensory is a definite hallmark of his poetry, as is the emphasis on the juxtapositional nature of images. Ginsberg’s idea of the gap created in the juxtaposition of two images wherein the totality of experience may be apprehended corresponds to Pound’s idea of the image as an intellectual and emotional complex within a moment of time. However, Ginsberg’s appropriation of the image is not purely imagist. Instead of the typically imagist one-image poem, he integrates the juxtaposition of chains of images into his long line to support the construction thereof, thus appropriating imagist ideas to form his own style. It also needs to be said that his concerns are much more explicitly mystical and visionary than those of the imagists, and the images are often used to support this concern. More than the imagists, he emphasises the idea that the most profound spiritual and visionary moments are contained within the ordinary and the everyday – also a key idea in Ginsberg’s Buddhist philosophy.

3.3.1.2.2 Diction, language and style

A word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried, and placed right side up on a clean surface. –

William Carlos Williams –

One of the most important and lasting influences of imagism is the transformation that it brought about in the language of poetry. The imagists rejected the excessively grandiose, vague rhetorical and clichéd use of language characteristic of poetry written at the turn of the century (Pratt, 1992b:10; Stead, 1986:34; Rodway, 1992:97 and Monroe, 1992:25-26). Their project was to cleanse poetic language by aiming at precision and hardness of language, in order to exemplify the objectivity of their vision and the concentration of their thought (Pratt, 1992b:10). The imagists’ prerequisites for poetic language were precision, brevity, concreteness and hardness, together with an absolute simplicity and sincerity (Monroe, 1992:26; Harmer, 1975:157 and Pratt, 1992b:10). This is also what Pound (in Eliot, 1964:3) was concerned with in his second principle of imagism: “use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation”, and in his injunction to “use no superfluous
word ... which does not reveal something ... go in fear of abstractions (in Eliot, 1964:4-5).

The aim of this was to create a diction and style which would not only be highly individual and unstereotyped, but also intensive rather than diffuse (Monroe, 1992:26). As can be surmised from the adjectives used to describe this diction, the imagists wanted to create a poetic language that would be intensely physical in its impact (see Harmer, 1975:45). Furthermore, imagist poetry’s move away from the elaborate and intricate language of pre-modernist poetry also incorporated an emphasis on colloquial language and everyday speech patterns. Imagism discarded archaic traditions and rather appropriated the authentic vitality of contemporary speech (Monroe, 1992:26). This idea was more expressly developed by William Carlos Williams, and via him transmitted to Ginsberg (see Ginsberg, 1983:37). Compare for example the following extract from section XVII of Williams’ Spring and all (Litz & MacGowan, 1986:216), where both the colloquialism and natural speech rhythms are evident:

(...)  
Get the rhythm  

That sheet stuff  
's a lot a cheese.  

Man  
gimme the key  

and lemme loose -  
I make 'em crazy  

with my harmonies -  
Shoot it Jimmy

Thus the notions of colloquial language and everyday speech rhythms become very important in developments originating from imagist ideas (see also sections 2.2.4.1 and 3.2.1.1.3). This aspect clearly relates to the Beats’ emphasis on spontaneity – the idea that experience should be recaptured in the language of the moment – as well as the Beat emphasis on freedom of expression in both content and form.
Many of Ginsberg’s Beat poems show his use of everyday colloquial language rather than elevated poetic diction. One very obvious manifestation of this is the use of colloquial or slang words predominantly associated with jive talk – including expletives. In ‘Malest cornifici tuo Catullo’ (CP:123) this is obvious:

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. Ah don't think I’m sickening.
You're angry at me. For all of my lovers?
It's hard to eat shit, without having visions;
when they have eyes for me it's like Heaven.

Expressions like “new young cat” (L 2) and “it's hard to eat shit” (L 8) are typical jive talk expressions, and Ginsberg’s use of them in poetry was certainly innovative, considering the mainstream style of intellectual and classical poetry of the era. Another important aspect of this poem is the conversational style thereof. The whole poem is written in an informal speech style, with the diction suited to the informality. The same kind of style is evident in a poem like ‘America’ (CP:146-148):

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.
I can't stand my own mind.
America when will we end the human war?
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
I don't feel good don't bother me.
(...)
I'm sick of your insane demands
When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?
America after all it's you and I who are perfect not the next world.
Your machinery is too much for me. (L 1-17)

This long poem is an indictment of conservative American values from the Beat perspective, and is expressed in a declamatory yet informal style, incorporating many slang expressions. The language here, as in the previous poem, is to the point, simple and undecorated. However, it also needs to be pointed out that the diction of Ginsberg’s Beat poetry is more than just a conversational style using colloquial language. Like Pound, for example, his poetry incorporates a variety of
styles and dictions, a conglomerate of voices. In ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) this is particularly evident. Some aspects of the diction in ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) definitely incorporate underground slang and informal and conversational styles. However, ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) is also a prophetic poem, and its style borrows much from the incantatory Jewish tradition which Ginsberg feels himself a part of, as well as Biblical styles (Clark, 1970:136). The recurrent syntax and repeated structure of the whole of ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) are testimony of this, as are the Biblical prophetic style and imagery of particularly the second part:

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!
Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the mind!

(...)
Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the flood! Highs!
Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years’ animal screams and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!
Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers!
Down to the river! into the street! (L 84-93)

This declamatory, incantatory and Biblical style occurs throughout the poem, but is also mixed with a more conversational slang style – as well as with a style that attempts to give expression to a more mystical experience:

with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls, incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind leaping towards poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the motionless world of Time between, (L 11-12)

Compare this with yet another stylistic variation, from the last part of the poem ‘America’ (CP:146-148):

He wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red Reader’s Digest. Her wants our auto plants in Siberia. Him big bureaucracy running our fillingstations.
Her make us all work sixteen hours a day. Help. (L 66-67)
The style here is intended to mock conventionalised middle-class ideas of how non-native speakers of English use the language. This is slotted in with the rest of the poem's uncomplicated and direct diction, to create a fusion of different styles and diction.

Thus Ginsberg's Beat poetry shows a definite similarity to the imagist preoccupation with a diction and style derived from everyday language. However, his poetry takes this much further than the imagists ever did, in its incorporation of the conversational style, the use of slang language and the incorporation of a variety of different styles.

There is also a dimension of diction in which Ginsberg's Beat poetry is radically different from imagist ideas. Ginsberg's poetry seldom conforms to the imagist ideal of brevity and hardness, but is rather characterised by its effusion, its unstoppable overflow of language. Again, 'Howl' (CP:126-133) is an excellent example of this, as any of the extracts quoted so far would indicate. It is by no means suited to the imagist preoccupation with brevity, hardness or objectivity, and is unabashedly and excessively subjective. This of course was one of the major criticisms that the New Critics levelled at Ginsberg's poetry (see section 3.1). Thus Ginsberg's poetry is decidedly against imagist poetics in its blatant subjectivity and its immoderate and extravagant language. However, even this characteristic of Ginsberg's poetry may be related to another imagist idea: that the experience of the moment should be described in the language of the moment, as it is felt by the person involved. It is here that the paradox of imagist poetry comes into play, a paradox fully exploited by Ginsberg. The experience depicted in an imagist poem is invariably subjective, since it has to do with the subjective sensory (and emotional or intellectual) experience depicted in the poem. However, this experience is objectified, and the imagist poem invariably strives after objectivity, clarity and hardness. Ginsberg's poetry places a greater emphasis on the subjectivity of all experience, and adapts language to be closer to this subjective experience. In other words, there is necessarily a direct correlation between the language and the individual and personal body that uses it, as well as this body's social experience. It is, for example, in this context that Ginsberg (1984b:81) points out that his body rhythm and experience is essentially different from Williams', hence the difference in the diction and style of their poetry, with Williams' typically terse lines arranged in colloquial speech patterns and
Ginsberg's non-stop effusion of "mouthing madly" arranged in continuous linked passages.

As far as diction, language and style are concerned, then, Ginsberg's debt to imagism lies predominantly in his use of everyday and colloquial language, instead of elevated poetic diction. However, as with his use of the image, he adapts imagist ideas to his own purposes, and therefore integrates the use of colloquial language in a wider spectrum of stylistic voices in his poetry. The imagist characteristics of brevity and hardness are not characteristic of Ginsberg's poetry, but he does ascribe to the imagist idea that language should be suited to the experience of the moment. In his case, the language suited to his particular experience is simply radically different from the language that the imagists felt to be appropriate.

3.3.1.2.3 Formal freedom

The entire movement of imagism, focused as it was on the immediacy of experience, strove towards greater poetic freedom, manifested in a greater autonomy from the formalistic conventions of poetry (Harmer, 1975:148). Imagist poetry is characterised by its emancipation of form because it tries to capture the essence of experience as it is felt, rather than to organise it inaccurately in conventionally acceptable verse forms, metres and rhyme patterns (Harmer, 1975:147-148). The formal freedom of imagist poetry is thus based on the movement's intrinsic belief in immediacy, sincerity and simplicity (Monroe, 1992:25). For this reason, imagist poetry is written in *vers libre*, with no fixed form, rhythm or rhyme (Harmer, 1975:151 and Pratt, 1992a:77).63 This is not to say that imagist poetry is completely formless. The image that is the poem determines its own idiosyncratic rhythm and form (Pratt, 1992a:78). As Pound (in Eliot, 1964:9) states: "I think there is a fluid as well as a solid content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase ... a vast number of subjects cannot be precisely, and therefore not properly rendered in symmetrical forms."

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63 For this reason, imagist poetry starts to blur the conventional distinction between prose and poetry (Harmer, 1975:154 & Monroe, 1992:29), a process that still continues particularly in postmodernist experimentations.
As far as rhythm is concerned, he states that “I believe in an absolute rhythm ... which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man’s rhythm ... will be ... his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” (in Eliot, 1964:9). The rhythm of the poem will therefore be individual and unstereotyped, based on a sincere organic relationship with the content being expressed. Therefore the entire form of the poem should not be determined by pre-set rules or conventions, but should flow from the feeling inherent in the image presented in the poem.

Rhythm and rhyme, as much as the image, are also manifestations of what might be called the imagist “doctrine of hardness”. As Zach (1991:238) points out, the poetic hardness that the imagist poets strove after was achieved by avoiding symmetrical, isochronic metres, which were branded soft, monotonous and soporific. Instead, the imagists attempted to trace in poetic rhythm “the ‘rough’ ... contours of ‘things’. Even the concentration on the image may be interpreted in terms of the desire for a resistant hardness”.

It has already been pointed out that the notion of organic unity between form and content is characteristic of Beat poetry. In this respect, then, there is a very strong similarity between imagist and Beat poetics. Both value spontaneity and regard the poem as the spontaneous expression of experience, while rejecting conventionalised form as irrelevant and obstructive to the honest and instinctive expression of experience. Instead, the nature of the experience determines its own form, and creates a form which is often free in terms of poetic convention. However, Beat poetry is by no means formless, but contains internal mechanisms which create a unique form. ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133), for example, is a freely structured poem but with many devices which are organically related to the content and serve to bind the whole poem together. The recurrent syntax is one such device, as is the repetition of certain words and phrases. In part one it is predominantly the recurrent syntactical construction of who together with several linked phrases that help to structure the poem, as well as the repeated use of verbs in the progressive form. Compare the beginning of the poem, with the progressive forms of verbs emphasised:

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,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated, (L 1-5)

In the second part of the poem the devices for creating formal connections spring directly from the focus of this part of the poem: the indictment of the evil god of American materialism, personified as the Biblical god Moloch. The declamatory style repeatedly invokes the name of Moloch, linked to several descriptions following the same syntactical pattern:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money!
Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! (L 83)

In the third and last section, addressed to Carl Solomon, similar techniques of repetition and syntactical patterning are used. Here it is predominantly the phrase “I’m with you in Rockland” that is repeated, followed by the syntactical construction where plus a chain of descriptive clauses:

I’m with you in Rockland
where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses
I’m with you in Rockland
where you drink the tea of the breasts of the spinsters of Utica
I’m with you in Rockland
where you pun on the bodies of your nurses the harpies of the Bronx
I’m with you in Rockland
where you scream in a straitjacket that you’re losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss (L 101-104)

Thus the form and the content of a poem like ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) are organically fused, with no external form imposed on the subject matter, but the one flowing organically from the other.

64 According to Brewer’s dictionary of phrase and fable, Moloch was the god of the Ammonites, to whom parents sacrificed their children (2 Kings 23:10) by killing and burning them. The term is now used for anything that demands the sacrifice of what one holds most dear (Room, 1995:710).
This is also true of the rhythm of Ginsberg's poetry. The rhythm develops naturally from the content of the poem, but also from the speech and body rhythm of the author. Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:130) places great emphasis on this aspect of his poetry:

I was working with my own neural impulses and writing impulses. See, the difference is between someone sitting down to write a poem in a definite preconceived metrical pattern and filling in that pattern, and someone working with his physiological movements and arriving at a pattern which might even have a name, or might even have a classical usage, but arriving at it organically rather than synthetically. Nobody's got any objection to even iambic pentameter if it comes from a source deeper than the mind, that is to say if it comes from the breathing and the belly and the lungs.

Here the extremely subjective nature of Ginsberg's poetry is explicitly linked to the formal dimension, and one is again faced with the Beat idea that the individual body as physical entity is the source of poetry. Thus the rhythms of a poem like 'Howl' (CP:126-133) are not determined by pre-set formal patterns, but grow from the emotion and ideas expressed in the poem. The rhythms of the whole poem are mostly irregular, but the repetitions of certain phrases give it an incantatory, rhythmic quality, sometimes slower, and sometimes extremely urgent and frantic, as in the second section of the poem.

Having said this, it is also necessary to note that Ginsberg does occasionally make use of symmetrical rhythms, often for a playful or whimsical effect. In the poem 'Fie my fum' (CP:23) the rhythm, together with a clever play on sounds and words, create a strongly structured poem with humorous effect:

Pull my daisy,
Tip my cup,
Cut my thoughts
For coconuts,

Bone my shadow,
Dove my soul,
Set a halo
On my skull,
The organic unity of form and content in Ginsberg's poetry is one of the most important similarities with imagist poetry. However, this idea is interpreted in different ways in imagist poetry and in Beat poetry. Imagist poetry places the emphasis on the object, and holds that the form and rhythm of the poem should be as close as possible to the sensory experience of the object. Ginsberg's emphasis is less on the individual object, and more on emotional or spiritual states of being, and the language and rhythms associated with these states of being. This is connected with Ginsberg's greater emphasis on subjectivity, and on the role of the individual's unique body rhythms in the writing process. Lastly, Ginsberg is also much more open to experimentation with different kinds of rhythms, used for particular effects, so that his use of rhythm is more eclectic and experimental than in the case of pure imagist poetry.

3.3.1.2.4 The lyric

Another result of the importance of the immediacy of experience is the fact that the imagist poem is invariably lyric. It invokes the moment, ignoring the context or any narrative sequence of time. The poem exists outside time and space; it is contained within itself and its own image.

Most of Ginsberg's poetry is indeed lyric, but often has a strong narrative strain. 'Howl' (CP:126-133), for example, implicitly tells the stories of many of Ginsberg's friends, while a later poem like 'Kaddish' (CP:209-224) tells the story of Ginsberg's mother Naomi. Nevertheless, both these poems are also lyrical. The poem 'Many loves' (CP:156-158) tells the retrospectively narrated story of Ginsberg's first sexual encounter with Neal Cassady, but is interwoven with lyrical strains:

Neal Cassady was my animal: he brought me to my knees and taught me the love of his cock and the secrets of his mind
And we met and conversed, went walking in the evening by the park
Up to Harlem, recollecting Denver, and Dan Budd, a hero
And we made shift to sack out in Harlem, after a long evening,
Jack and host in a large double bed, I volunteered for the cot, and Neal
Volunteered for the cot with me, we stripped and lay down.

(...) I lay there trembling, and felt his great arm like a king's
And his breast, his heart slow thudding against my back,
and his middle torso, narrow and made of iron, soft at my back,
his fiery firm belly warming me while I trembled –
His belly of fists and starvation, his belly a thousand girls kissed in Colorado
his belly of rocks thrown over Denver roofs, prowess of jumping and fists, his
stomach of solitudes,
His belly of burning iron and jails affectionate to my side:
I began to tremble, he pulled me in closer with his arm, and hugged me long and
close
my soul melted, secrecy departed, I became
Thenceforth open to his nature as a flower in the shining sun. (L 1-23)

Thus the distinction between narrative and lyric becomes blurred in some of
Ginsberg's poetry, and the lyrical moments of imagism might become assimilated in
a bigger narrative. This is also true of poems like 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139) and
'A supermarket in California' (CP:136). In such cases the narrative parts are often
highly subjective and drawn from personal sensory, intellectual, emotional and
spiritual experiences. It might be argued that the Beat emphasis on the personal
nature of poetry leads to a diffusion of the boundaries between epic and lyric, since
both may be merely aspects within the continuum of experience. The epic
emphasises the continuity of experience, while the lyric focuses on single moments
within that continuum. In Ginsberg's poetry the two are often interwoven. In
'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139), for example, the poem begins with a small narrative
of how Ginsberg and Kerouac end up sitting next to the river, and what they do while
they are there, and then proceeds in a more lyrical style to the moment of insight
generated by this experience. The beginning of the poem reads as follows:

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade
of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house
hills and cry.
Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted iron pole, companion, we thought the same
thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed, surrounded by the
gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery.

(...) Look at the Sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray shadow against the sky, big as
a man, sitting dry on top of a pile of ancient sawdust – (L 1-4)
The poem then proceeds in a lyrical mode, containing descriptions of the sunflower and musings on its significance, leading on to the final epiphany moment.

A perfect beauty of a sunflower! A perfect excellent lovely sunflower existence! A sweet natural eye to the new hip moon, woke up alive and excited grasping in the sunset shadow sunrise golden monthly breeze!

(...)

We’re not our skin of grime, we’re not our dread black dusty imageless locomotive, we’re all golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown vision. (L 15-22)

In Ginsberg’s poetry then, the epic and lyric styles are intermingled as two different expressions of experience, with different emphases. This contrasts with the imagist mode of writing which is almost exclusively lyric, invoking only the moment, and ignoring any kind of development of chains of moments in time.

All of the above-mentioned characteristics of imagism inevitably resulted in poetry that became increasingly fragmented, discontinuous and obscure. In its purest form, the imagist poem simply presents an image, enigmatically refusing to subject it to explanation or abstraction. Pound’s epigrammatic poems are typical of this, and are often described as cryptic. This effect would be compounded by later developments which proceeded from imagism. Pound’s endeavours in vorticism and later techniques of aggregation and juxtaposition, which he shared with Eliot, are typical of the ways in which imagism proper became adapted to new needs. It showed that imagism was not a dead end from which one could only turn back, but on the contrary, was a starting point for a new development in the poetry of the English language. These techniques involved the spontaneous adding of images to each other, without the imposition of a structure and without logical or narrative continuity. This is the principle around which much of Eliot’s poetry is built, and on which all of Pound’s Cantos depend.

This principle of juxtaposition or aggregation is also typical of Ginsberg’s poetry, and he develops it to the extreme in his longer poems (see examples quoted earlier). Nevertheless, it is also possible to regard Ginsberg’s poetry as opposed to the increasingly obscure and enigmatic poetry of high modernism. Ginsberg’s poetry in...
many ways reaches back to primary experience, to basic feelings and emotions instantly accessible to everyone, which he attempts to express in a particularly innovative way.

3.3.1.3 Ginsberg and imagism: summary

The influence of imagism on Ginsberg’s Beat poetry is apparent in several aspects, though not in all. As far as the notion of the image in imagist poetry is concerned, Ginsberg inherits the imagists’ focus on the concrete, the everyday and the sensory as well as the emphasis on the juxtapositional nature of images. However, Ginsberg’s appropriation of the image is not purely imagist. Instead of the typically imagist one-image poem, he constructs chains of juxtaposed images into his long line to support the construction thereof.

Another important inheritance from the imagists concerns diction, language and style. Ginsberg’s debt to imagism lies predominantly in his use of everyday and colloquial language, instead of elevated poetic diction. However, as with his use of the image, he adapts imagist ideas to his own purposes, and therefore integrates the use of colloquial language in a wider stylistic spectrum in his poetry. The imagist characteristics of brevity and hardness are not characteristic of Ginsberg’s poetry, but he does ascribe to the imagist idea that language should be suited to the experience of the moment.

The organic unity of form and content in Ginsberg’s poetry is one of the most important similarities with imagist poetry, even though this idea is interpreted in different ways in imagist poetry and in Beat poetry. Imagist poetry places the emphasis on the object, and holds that the form and rhythm of the poem should be as close as possible to the sensory experience of the object. Ginsberg’s emphasis is less on the individual object, and more on emotional or spiritual states of being, and the language and rhythms associated with these states of being. Lastly, Ginsberg is also much more open to experimentation with different kinds of rhythms, used for particular effects, so that his use of rhythm is more eclectic than in pure imagist poetry.

An important difference with imagist poetry lies in the fact that imagist poetry is exclusively lyric, while Ginsberg’s poetry consists of an integration of epic and
lyrical modes, in an attempt to give different perspectives on the nature of experience.

Ginsberg's debt to imagism should be clear, as should the important fact that his poetry is not purely imagist, but rather appropriates certain ideas from imagism within an innovative poetics. It should therefore also be apparent that there are many aspects of Ginsberg's poetry which cannot be accounted for in terms of imagist influences, such as the excessive subjectivity of his poetry, the often hallucinatory nature of his writing, and his very strong dislike of conventional expression and bourgeois morality coupled with a highly individualistic inclination. His concern with different states of consciousness, with mystical experience and with religion can also not be accommodated within an abstractionist framework such as that of imagism. The following section will attempt to explain some of these issues in terms of the influence of another modernist movement, diametrically opposed to imagism: surrealism.  

3.3.2 Surrealism

As in the case of imagism, the aim of this section is not to argue that Ginsberg's poetry may be defined as surrealist, but rather to show how certain aspects of his Beat poetics may be traced to a surrealist source or influence. Additionally, this section will also indicate how the two opposing movements of imagism and surrealism are integrated in Ginsberg's Beat poetry. The section will first present a brief overview of possible links with surrealism, after which Ginsberg's poems will be discussed in terms of surrealist aesthetics.

3.3.2.1 Echoes of surrealist aesthetics in Ginsberg's poetics

there is an inner
anterior image
of divinity
beckoning me out
to pilgrimage – Allen Ginsberg –

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65 Even though it is conventional to regard imagism and surrealism as part of two opposing strains of modernism, some critics, like Skaff (1985) see definite links and similarities between the two movements. From the following discussion some of these similarities will emerge, and the significance of this will be discussed in section 3.3.2.3.
Like imagism, surrealism was a concerted, deliberate and programmatic movement with clearly articulated aims and a strong group cohesion (Russell, 1985:122). It took its name from a neologism coined by Apollinaire, to which the surrealists gave more specific import (see Breton, 1998 [1934]). It first emerged as a conscious movement in the period immediately following World War I and the Russian Revolution, and the social upheaval of the time had a definite influence on the movement, as Breton (1998) argues extensively in his discussion of the negativity and destructiveness which reached their climax in the war. However, since surrealism developed primarily in France (where the situation was more stable than in many other parts of Europe such as Germany and Russia), its aesthetic was never as dramatically challenged by social turbulence as were other avant-garde movements like Berlin dada and Russian futurism (Russell, 1985:123). Nevertheless, surrealism is definitely infused with a sense of the disturbed times in which it developed.

The influence of the social environment on the development of surrealism is matched by the influence of the many other avant-garde movements that made up modernism. The influence of dada is particularly important. As a matter of fact, surrealism emerged out of the Zurich dada movement (Russell, 1985:123 and Hughes, 1981:213) and the influence of its ambassador Tristan Tzara was especially crucial. The interactions and relationships between the two groups are complex, but as Russell (1985:125) points out, the influence of dada had a liberating catalyst-like effect on the development of surrealism. Dada's attacks on "logic, bourgeois ethics, and self control provoked feelings of absolute freedom, a freedom that originated in the denial of any a priori principle of order and value" (Russell, 1985:123).

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66 This article by Breton, first published in 1934, provides a good background to the development of the movement over a period of ten years, as well as its major players and publications.

67 The official inception date for the surrealist movement is generally taken to be 1924, marked by the publication of Bréton’s first Manifete du surreàlisme.

68 However, dada is definitely not the only avant-garde influence on surrealism. Russell (1985:123-124), for example, mentions the influence of the Italian futurists, the Russian futurists, and the surrealists' French avant-garde predecessors Apollinaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Jarry and so forth. Hughes (1981:248) also mentions other avant-garde influences, like Byron, Hugo, Baudelaire, Huysmans and the Marquis de Sade. The surrealists very self-consciously placed themselves within this chain of "disruptors of established literary tradition" (Russell, 1985:123).

69 See Russell (1985:124-129) for a discussion of the relationship between these two movements.
1985:125). This destructive and anarchic force of dada was what first appealed to Breton (1998) who describes it as "a state of mind essentially anarchic ... a deliberate refusal to judge ... and, perhaps, in the last analysis, a certain spirit of negation which was making itself conspicuous".

However, there is also a positive dimension of dada which strongly influenced surrealism, "a positive faith in spontaneity, irrationality, and playful absurdity" (Russell, 1985:125). Breton (quoted in Russell, 1985:126) makes this double-sided influence clear in the following comment: "DADA, recognizing only instinct, condemns a priori all meaning. According to DADA, we must give up all control over ourselves. There can no longer be any question of the dogmas of morality and taste."

Despite the important influence of dada on surrealism, there are very definite differences between the two. Russell (1985:126) makes this distinction clear when he states that

whereas for Tzara instinct was privileged only because it undermined the authority of reason and any aesthetic, philosophic, or moral order, for Breton and the proto-surrealists the disruptiveness and passion they were exposed to while submitting to subconscious impulses seemed to promise an entirely new manner of perceiving and experiencing the world.

Surrealism as a concerted movement is one of the movements within the broader development of modernism. Nevertheless, the central ideas of surrealist art are not limited to that particular time, but has appeared as a shifting body of thought and artistic practice centuries before – and probably after (Levy, 1968:3). As Blanchot (1995:85) puts it, surrealism is "no longer a school, but a state of mind survives .... It is no longer here or there: it is everywhere. It is a ghost, a brilliant obsession." From this the immense influence of surrealism on contemporary art also becomes apparent – an influence which might have been latently present in the high modernist canon, but has certainly made its presence very strongly felt especially in the earlier forms of postmodernism (see section 2.4.3). Surrealism has had a profound influence on all the arts (Levy, 1968:3) – although the writers of the movement are very much at its core (Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:16 and Ades, 1974:34). As
Russell (1985:148) points out, the surrealist revolution was in the first instance a poetic revolution\(^7\), from where its influence has extended to the other arts.

Under the leadership of André Breton (who played a similar role in this movement than Pound in the development of imagism)\(^7\), the surrealists aimed to free art from the fetters of convention, morality and reason, and instead to create through “pure psychic automatism, by which, orally or in writing or in any other way, one attempts to express the true function of thought. Thought dictated without any control by logic, beyond any aesthetic or ethical considerations” (Breton, quoted in Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:15).

The above definition is taken from Breton’s first surrealist manifesto in 1924, in which he continues to explain the ideas of surrealism as follows:

Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior quality of certain hitherto neglected forms of association, in the omnipotence of dream, and the undirected play of thought. It aims to the final destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to its substitution in their place as a solution to the main problems of life. (Breton, quoted in Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:15.)

The ultimate aim of surrealism, then, was “above all liberation from constraints – logic, morality and the rest – with the aim of recovering [the] original powers of spirit” (Breton, quoted in Hughes, 1981:212). An assumption which is latent in all these definitions, but particularly important for an understanding of surrealism, is the fact that it is, as a whole, based on the reconciliation of opposites. Breton (1998) makes this clear in the following statement (first made in the 1924 manifesto): “I believe in the future transmutation of those seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, so to speak.” This reconciliation of opposites takes place on many levels: aesthetic and social, dream and reality, reason and irrationality\(^7\), unconscious and conscious, disparity and unity, flow and stasis (Russell, 1985:131, 141, 147 and Blanchot, 1991:86, 92). All of these aspects will be discussed in further detail in due course, but it is essential to constantly keep

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\(^7\) It is telling that during the formational period of the movement (up to 1921), surrealism was wholly made up of writers (Hughes, 1981:221).

\(^7\) See also Hughes (1981:212-213).

\(^7\) Russell (1985:131) points out that the surrealists’ appeal to the scientific theories of Freud to justify their own irrational theory of creativity also embodies this drive to the reconciliation of opposites.
this underlying impulse towards the reconciliation of opposites in mind, since it is one of the basic assumptions of surrealism.

The above descriptions of surrealism are those most often used to define the movement and its aims. However, it needs to be pointed out that there are also many difficulties surrounding the nature and development of the movement. As with any literary movement, it contains much diversity and change within its scope (see Breton, 1998), which makes it difficult to fix the nature of the movement on one final definition. For example, Russell (1985) points out that surrealism developed basically in two distinct phases. In the early phase (up to the mid 1920s) surrealist artists sought to disengage "conscious, critical judgment in order to allow the precious flow of images or 'inner voice' to be directly experienced" and to "stimulate the unconscious processes of response and creation through unexpected, and frequently gratuitous events and situations" (Russell, 1985:142). This is what Breton (1998) terms the intuitive epoch of surrealism (lasting from 1919-1925), in which the techniques of automatic writing and recording dreams dominate. After the mid-1920s surrealistic works become more sophisticated, deliberate and self-conscious (Russell, 1985:142-145). Breton (1998) refers to this period from 1925 to 1934 as the reasoning epoch of surrealism, in which the movement was faced with the "necessity of crossing over the gap that separates absolute idealism from dialectical materialism" (Breton, 1998). This necessity was largely caused by the increasing pressure on surrealism to "ask itself what were its proper resources and to determine their limits; it was forced to adopt a precise attitude, exterior to itself, in order to continue to 'face whatever exceeded these limits'" (Breton, 1998). It was also during this phase that a strong socio-political and ideological consciousness (and resulting internal conflicts) started to develop within the surrealist movement.

From these cursory ideas one may already surmise some of the similarities between surrealism and Beat poetry, in particular as far as the subjectivity, antirationalism, spontaneity and experimentation with different modes of consciousness are concerned. The emphasis on spirituality is another mutual characteristic that

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73 Apart from the typical problems arising from classification and simplification, Blanchot (1995) and Russell (1985) point out that surrealism is plagued by several internal inconsistencies and contradictions. However, although the scope of this dissertation does not allow for extensive discussion of these internal problematics and their various interpretations, the discussion takes these problematics into account.
surfaces. However, the influence of surrealism on Ginsberg’s poetry is much less researched and documented than the influence of imagism, and much less direct and explicit. Tytell (1976:225) sees the surrealist influence as less immediate than in the case of imagism, stating that such an influence might be ascribed more to the *Zeitgeist* and the fact that several surrealist painters had settled in America, than to specific contact between Ginsberg and surrealist artists.

Nevertheless, there are a few critics who emphasise the surrealist inclination of Ginsberg’s poetry (see section 2.2.5). Ferlinghetti’s (1984:46, 48, 50, 51) notes on the obscenity trial of ‘Howl’ contains the opinions of various supporters and detractors of the poem, several of whom mention the poem’s relationship to both dada and surrealism. Portugés (1984a:132) also indicates a possible relationship between Beat and surrealist aesthetics.

Stephenson (1990:6) regards surrealism as one of the most important influences on Beat poetry, and mentions several shared qualities between the two movements. Like the surrealists (and the imagists) the Beats formed an artistic-social movement — a group of creative individuals who protested and rebelled against social values and institutions as well as the fundamental premises of Western thought and culture. Both the surrealists and the Beats were subversive and revolutionary in a cultural-philosophical-aesthetic sense more than in a political sense. In common with the surrealists, the Beats regarded their society as suffering from a collective illness, manifested in the form of the cold war; the threat of atomic annihilation; the consumerism, conformity, and passivity of the mass of people (with their unacknowledged secret anxieties and desires); the blandness, the aridity, and the insipidity of contemporary life; the lack of spiritual values, the erosion of human ideals and goals by self-satisfaction, indifference, compliance, and complacency; the unchallenged excesses of the bureaucracy, the military, the police, and the intelligence communities; the technology mania; and the insidious hypnotic powers of television and other mass media (Stephenson, 1990:6-7).

The surrealists and the Beats cultivated extreme and highly experimental forms of expression and thus broke through the barriers of social acceptability, literary decorum and censorship. The Beats’ energy and their witty provocation of
convention, as well as their need to explore hitherto unexplored dimensions of experience also align them with the surrealists.

Tytell (1976:226-235) is also one of few critics who point out the legacy of surrealism in Ginsberg's poetry. According to him, the main importance of surrealist aesthetics was the fact that it "suggested the state of mind that proved liberating enough for Ginsberg" (Tytell, 1976:226-227). The surrealist emphasis on subconscious irrationality as a basis for a positive social programme and the importance attached to the inner flow of experience are both influential ideas of the Beat aesthetic. This manifests itself in the exploitation of psychic automatism, which can be defined as a spontaneous untrammelled expression of mind-flow, without the imposition of rational order or coherence. The surrealist emphasis on altered states of consciousness, as found in dreams, hallucinations and drug-induced visions, is also an aspect of Beat poetry.

Géfin (1984:278-279) points out the surrealist inheritance in Ginsberg's poetry, focusing on the characteristics of spontaneity (corresponding to the surrealist notion of psychic automatism) and the disregard of reason, order and logic in favour of an inner reality found in dreams, reveries and hallucinations. Géfin (1984:278) states that this release of the forces of the unconscious is aimed at reaching "a state of higher consciousness, or cosmic consciousness, an attainment of mystical illumination", thus linking the Beats' spiritual concerns with the surrealist influence. In this process the supremacy of the self as centre of consciousness is crucial — another similarity between surrealist and Beat aesthetics.

In conclusion, Géfin (1984:278) declares that the surrealist influence in Ginsberg's poetry obviously "goes against the grain of Poundian modernism and the ideogrammic method proper". Ginsberg's attempts to find a new and distinctive mode of expression prompted him to utilise all manifestations of artistic expression that he felt drawn to, and integrate even apparently opposing strains of modernism in his own style. While his appropriation of imagist ideas via William Carlos Williams certainly had a crucial influence on the development of his poetics, its objectively particularist style proved too limiting for Ginsberg's expansive and rhapsodic personal, social and spiritual vision. Moving beyond this style places him — in certain respects — in a parallel relationship to ideas derived from surrealist aesthetics, as Simpson (1984:20) also points out. Ginsberg himself acknowledges his affinity with
and debt to surrealism, in the poem ‘At Apollinaire’s grave’ (CP:180-182). This poem is not only a tribute to the influence of surrealist ideas on Beat poetics, but is also an expression of Ginsberg’s desire to give these ideas a contemporary American expression:

Guillaume Guillaume how I envy your fame your accomplishment for American letters
your Zone with its long crazy line of bullshit about death
come out of the grave and talk thru the door of my mind
issue new series of images oceanic haikus blue taxicabs in Moscow negro statues of Buddha
pray for me on the phonograph record of your former existence
with a long sad voice and strophes of deep sweet music sad and scratchy as World War I
I’ve eaten the blue carrots you sent out of the grave and Van Gogh’s ear and maniac peyote of Artuad
and will walk down the streets of New York in the black cloak of French poetry
improvising our conversation in Paris at Père Lachaise
and the future poem that takes its inspiration from the light bleeding into your grave (L 24-33)

3.3.2.2 Ginsberg’s poetry and surrealism

... the rest of earth is unseen,

an outer universe invisible,

Unknown except thru

language

airprint

magic images

— Allen Ginsberg —

This section will present a discussion of the salient features of surrealism and attempt to link these features to characteristics of Ginsberg’s Beat poetry. It does not constitute a comparison between Beat poetry and surrealist poetry, but rather aims to indicate the ways in which Ginsberg’s Beat poetry shows similarities with surrealist ideas. For this reason, the discussion of surrealist characteristics makes no claim to comprehensiveness, but is simply intended to serve as a framework for an

74 Since surrealism is not an exclusively literary phenomenon, these characteristics will be drawn predominantly from the general approach of surrealist artists rather than from any individual genre.
investigation of the interaction between surrealist ideas and the Beat poetry of Ginsberg.

3.3.2.2.1 The freedom of the individual and the revolt against conventional society

The particular surrealist ideas influencing Ginsberg's poetics are numerous, but all proceed from the premise that the corruption, distortion and decay of Western civilisation destroy the inherent creative and spiritual potential of human beings. Breton (1998) introduces his discussion of surrealism with extensive comments on the nature of contemporary society in particular, and Western civilization in general. He describes the latter as "a whole series of intellectual, moral and social obligations that continually and from all sides weigh down upon man and crush him" (Breton, 1998). In more particular terms, he talks of the outrageous and disproportionate "stupidity", "hypocrisy" and "cynicism" of capitalist society, together with the physical and psychological destruction caused by the war. Surrealism proceeds from a basic refusal of and revolt against this situation, because it inhibits and destroys the potential of individuals (Breton, 1998). Short (1991:304) summarises this characteristic in his comment that surrealism has stood for revolt against everything that mutilates man's inner life, or stifles his imagination for the sake of "peace and quiet", law and order and the smooth running of the social machine. Crediting humanity, once liberated, with immense potential, the Surrealists have battled against all forces which encourage renunciation – against religion with its craven doctrine of original sin, against the institution of the family in which love is crucified, against work and the eight-hour day, the paradigm of regimented dehumanized existence.

From the above one of the important similarities between the surrealists and the Beats can be deduced: their shared revolt against a conventional and repressive society, their emphasis on the freedom and potential of the individual psyche, and their need to experience life in its most intense form (Levy, 1968:3). The Beats

75 This characteristic of surrealism may be traced back directly to the influence of dada, as Blanchot (1995:86) points out: "Surrealists seemed to their contemporaries to be destroyers. Dada's heritage is there for something. And the character of nonconformist violence was naturally the most striking." However, as in the case of the Beats, surrealism consisted of a double gesture encompassing both revolt and affirmation (see section 2.2.1). Blanchot (1995:86) also makes this clear: "Today, what
share the surrealist assumption that once individuals are initiated in the adult life\textsuperscript{76}, they become fully immersed in society’s restrictive moral codes which force them to give up desire and personal fulfilment because there is no place for these in a world defined by practical goals, material concerns and narrowly defined social relationships (Russell, 1985:129). Beat aesthetics therefore shares the surrealist goal of liberating the individual from the oppression of a utilitarian society and recreating the integral vitality and multidimensionality of individuals (Van Gorp \textit{et al.}, 1986:393).

The key concept here is personal freedom, on both the social and the aesthetic levels (Russell, 1985:157 and Breton, 1998). Hughes (1981:212) regards surrealism as the artistic movement most concerned with the essential quest for absolute freedom. Blanchot (1995:96) also emphasises this dimension of surrealism: “Finally, the poet demands an absolute freedom: he pushes away all control, he is master of his means, and just as free with respect to the literary tradition as he is indifferent to the demands of moral standards, religion, and even reading.”

This freedom is further related to the need to experience and express life in its immediacy and intensity (Blanchot, 1995:86 and Hughes, 1981:221), which in turn is associated with the surrealist aim of recovering the self in its totality, rediscovering a state in which “man manifests himself with all his possibilities” (Blanchot, 1995:86).

Ginsberg’s poem ‘Paterson’ (CP:40-41) is a clear dramatisation of these surrealist assumptions. The first stanza of this poem is a description of the qualities that the Beats reacted against within the society of their time, focusing predominantly on the materialism, mediocrity, regimentation and excessive rationality of the society. L 7 characterises this society as ruled by the “dumbbells of the ego with money and power”, and this description is further supported by the enumeration of environments which are seen as emblematic of this combination of characteristics: employment bureaus (L 4), magazine hallways (L 4), statistical cubicles (L 4), factory stairways (L 4). This strikes us is how much surrealism affirms more than it denies. There is a wonderful strength in it, a drunken and powerful youthfulness.”

\textsuperscript{76} The surrealists emphasise childhood as a “haunting model of alternative existence” where the individual is not forced to “suppress the intensity of desire and sensation in order to achieve practical goals” and thus inhabits “a world of immediacy, imaginative freedom, and unrestricted possibility” (Russell, 1985:129). With the entry into adulthood, all this of course changes.
4), psychiatric offices (L 5) and department stores (L 6). This dead world which is dominated only by “visions of money” (L 1) causes the individual to become numbly and powerlessly unhappy, filled with misery and impotent rage (L 10-11).

The only way for the self to surpass this stultifying world is to resort to and revel in those qualities which the rational and ordering society most despises: emotion, madness, spirituality, physicality, excess and desire. This is the vision of the authentic self that the second stanza of the poem asserts:

I would rather go mad, gone down the dark road to Mexico, heroin dripping in my veins,
eyes and ears full of marijuana.
eating the god Peyote on the floor of a mud hut on the border
or laying in a hotel room over the body of some suffering man or woman;
(...)
screaming and dancing in praise of Etemiy annihilating the sidewalk, annihilating reality,
screaming and dancing against the orchestra in the destructible ballroom of the world,
blood streaming from my belly and shoulders
flooding the city with its hideous ecstasy, rolling over the pavements and highways
by the bayoux and forests and derricks leaving my flesh and my bones hanging on the trees. (L 12-28)

The celebration of excess, nonconformism, and anti-establishment values is a way of affirming life, of not falling prey to the mindless, apathetic routines of conventional society. The same idea is expressed in ‘America’ (CP:146-148), which attacks the materialism, indifference, and superficiality of mainstream culture. Addressing America, the speaker asks: “Are you going to let you emotional life be run by Time Magazine?” (L 39), and instead wants America to return to a more humane, munificent, spiritual, and responsible state of being:

America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your clothes?
When will you look at yourself through the grave?
When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
America why are your libraries full of tears?
America when will you send your eggs to India? (L 8-13)
The revolt against the shallowness, superficiality and deadness of conventional society is thus an important shared characteristic between Beat poetry and surrealism, and in both cases is coupled with a positive affirmation of the sanctity of individual experience, the need for freedom and the belief that life needs to be experienced and described in all its physical, emotional and spiritual excesses and intensities as the only way of affirming the essential vitality of existence. Naturally, this often leads to the deliberate use of shock tactics by both the surrealists and the Beats, but in both cases these shock tactics (such as Ginsberg’s explicit descriptions of homosexuality, drug-use and crime) are intended to desensitise the reader (or listener) and to shock him into response. As Levy (1968:8) puts it, “[a]ge and habit have too often overcome the original intensity of living ... The surrealist fight is against apathy, not against incomprehension”.

3.3.2.2.2 Replacing reason with a more intuitive mode of apprehension

Another characteristic of Western civilization renounced by both the surrealists and the Beats is the excessive emphasis on reason and intellect as the primary means of engaging with the world (Germain, 1978:28 and Van Gorp et al., 1986:392-393). As Breton (1998) puts it, the intellectual dominance of “vulgar rationalism and chop logic” are “the causes of our horror and our destructive impulse”. Elsewhere in the same article he talks of the “reign of logic” and “the absolute rationalism which is still the fashion” (Breton, 1998). In particular, the surrealists reacted against a conception of “rationality which merely served the most debased interests of social stability and material production” (Russell, 1985:131). Breton (1998) also establishes this link: “Under colour of civilization, under pretext of progress, all that rightly or wrongly may be regarded as fantasy or superstition has been banished from the mind, all uncustumary searching after truth has been proscribed.”

As with the constraints of convention and society, this emphasis on utilitarian reason causes individuals to be cut off from essential dimensions of human potential: the body, emotion and spirituality. The excessive emphasis on rationality is an important cause of the individual and collective sense of limitation and alienation, of imaginative and sensual impoverishment and of personal discontinuity (Russell, 1985:129). Salvador Dali (quoted in Levy, 1968:5-6) has made the same point:
Realism, practical-rational, includes all the sordid mechanisms of logic and all mental prisons. Pleasure includes our world of subconscious desires, dreams, irrationality and imagination. Surrealism attempts to deliver the subconscious from the principle of reality, thus finding a source of splendid and delirious images.

To recover the holistic nature of experience and regain the immense potential of the individual, surrealism proposes replacing reason with a more intuitive mode of apprehension, based on the associative faculty of the mind, thus freeing thought and art from the control exercised by reason (Breton, 1998 and Levy, 1968:6). Blanchot (1995:92) describes this characteristic of surrealism as “the primacy of the imaginary, the call for the marvelous, the invocation of the surreal”. It also embraces characteristics such as irrationality, instinctuality, emotionality, mysticism and magic (Hughes, 1981:231 and Skaff, 1985:187, 193). As such, surrealism forms part of an ongoing countertradition which is fascinated with dreams, mystery, insanity, melancholy and fear, as opposed to the tradition of the reasonable and the real (Hughes, 1981:215). Its quest involves regaining the use of powers individuals possessed before these were destroyed by a materialistic civilization; powers which children⁷⁷, primitive peoples and the insane⁷⁸ seem to be the last to retain (Short, 1991:302; Skaff, 1985:193 and Russell, 1985:129). This also accounts for the surrealists’ fascination with child art, the art of the mad, and primitive or naïve art (Hughes, 1981:227). The shared quality in all of these cases seems to be that of unrestricted imagination.⁷⁹ The role of the imagination in surrealist aesthetics is crucial, since it is the “heart of poetic inspiration and creation” (Russell, 1985:130). Breton (quoted in Russell, 1985:13) makes the surrealist belief in the importance of imagination clear: “To reduce the imagination to a state of slavery ... — is to betray all sense of absolute justice within oneself. Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what can be ...”

⁷⁷ See previous footnote.
⁷⁸ The surrealists regarded madness as a privileged state, a conception which has been a part of traditional beliefs about insanity since earliest times, and was filtered through to surrealism from the Romantics (Hughes, 1981:213). This idea that madness gives access to both the darker side of the mind and to illuminative understanding is, of course, also an important conception in Beat writing (see section 2.2.4.2), which establishes another link between the surrealists and the Beats.
⁷⁹ The surrealist emphasis on the power of the imagination (among other things) places it in an explicitly romantic tradition (Russell, 1985:130), a tradition of which the Beats are also a part (see section 2.2.5).
In his second manifesto on surrealism Breton explained this surrealist process as “the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory” (quoted in Tytell, 1979:228). The recovery of the intuitive mode of being thus also involves a descent into the self, an exploration of the unconscious, and a pursuit of intensities of experience never approached in either the superficial mindless existence of mainstream society or the intellectualised and rational approach to life (Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:15-16).

Surrealism draws many of its ideas regarding the unconscious from Freudian psychoanalysis, but it tends to adapt psychoanalytic ideas selectively and for its own purposes (Russell, 1985:131 and Hughes, 1981:213). Basically, surrealism regards the unconscious as an immensely powerful force operating against the presumed authority of consciousness – a consciousness which aims to suppress desire by positivist explanation and classification. However, the unconscious keeps modes of emotion and desire alive, and constantly breaks through the barrier of the consciousness through jokes, slips of the tongue, spontaneous perceptions and fantasies, dreams – and art (Russell, 1985:131 and Skaff, 1985:189). Essentially, surrealism views art as originating from, appealing to and stimulating the subconscious, intuition, imagination and emotion (Levy, 1968:5 and Skaff, 1985:188). These domains (rather than reason) are regarded as the source of true knowledge of the world, and are therefore entities which need to be liberated rather than repressed (Skaff, 1985:188). For this reason, surrealism advocates the suspension of self-control and critical reflection during the creative state, instead seeking spontaneous expression and euphoric states of mind (Russell, 1985:127). The aim of this is to identify the unknown activities of the unconscious and desire, to explore it and allow it to be articulated on its own terms.

This intuitive mode of being necessarily involves experimentation with the demonic, evil, and negative forces of the self (Russell, 1985:133). However, for the

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80 The relationship between Freudian psychoanalysis and surrealism is complex, and cannot be discussed here in any detail. For a more thorough discussion, see Hughes (1981:213) and Russell (1985:131).

81 However, for most of the surrealists (with the exception of Antonin Artaud) the unconscious is an essentially benign (though extremely powerful) force (Russell, 1985:132). In Ginsberg’s Beat poetry, on
surrealists the unconscious is also a place of marvellous beauty. The point is that the self in its totality needs to be experienced, incorporating the positive and negative manifestations of all intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions.

It is important to note that surrealism does not propose doing away with the intellect entirely; rather, it wants to break down the barriers between oppositions such as rationality and irrationality, unconscious and conscious, and imagination and reason (Russell, 1985:122). It regards these barriers as repressive, and believes that from the reconciliation of these opposites new forms of perception and behaviour will emerge, allowing individuals to overcome their isolation from the environment and other people (Russell, 1985:122). This state of reconciliation of opposites is in fact the ultimate aim of surrealism – the achievement of that absolute, expanded state of total being which Breton refers to as surreality (Russell, 1985:131 and Skaff, 1985:189). Breton (1998) clearly states that “we have attempted to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, or finally becoming one. This final unification is the supreme aim of surrealism”. By accessing the unconscious, and integrating it with the conscious, surrealism aims to produce a force “through which all of the discrete objects and experiences of the phenomenal world are fused into a state of unity” (Skaff, 1985:189).

For the surrealists, accessing the unconscious was often aided by the use of hallucinogenics, the induction of trance-states and the utilisation of dreams as a channel to the unconscious (Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:17; Germain, 1987:26; Ades, 1974:49 and Russell, 1985:142). As Hughes (1981:213) puts it, both psychoanalysis and surrealism regarded dreams as “the gate to art. In dreams, the id spoke; the dreaming mind was unlegislated truth”. Chance association or games of chance were similarly utilised (Hughes, 1981:225 and Russell, 1985:143). Added to this is the technique of automatic writing (which will be discussed in section 3.3.2.2.4). All of these aspects point to the fact that surrealism regards poetry as a means of visionary and spiritual discovery (Tytell, 1979:228), highly subjective and often obscure, because it refuses “to sacrifice truth to the inner vision ... for the sake of immediacy of communicability. The latter is a traffic in false currency because it is

the other hand, the horrific and terrifying often make itself felt as part of the totality of unconscious desire – which is not necessarily always benign.
tied up with a purely contingent, external and unacceptable reality" (Short, 1991:303).

From the above another characteristic of surrealism may be deduced, namely the fact that it regards external reality as merely one aspect of existence, and attaches much more value to a higher level of internal, subjective and spiritual reality, a reality beyond the real that is more authentic than the logical and objective universe (Skaff, 1985:189). As Levy (1968:3) clearly states, surrealism "attempts to discover and explore the 'more real than real world behind the real', meaning which is expansive behind the contractile fact".

Osborne (1970:1115) summarises all of these ideas in the following comment:

> Basically Surrealism sought to explore the frontiers of experience and to broaden the logical and matter-of-fact view of reality by fusing it with instinctual, subconscious, and dream experience in order to achieve an absolute or 'super' reality ... Within this general aim it combined a large number of different and not altogether coherent doctrines and techniques, the most characteristic of which were the various attempts to breach the dominance of reason and conscious control by methods designed to release primitive urges and imagery.

Ginsberg's emphasis on a spiritual and visionary style of poetry is obviously related to the above. However, there is another one of surrealism's curious paradoxes at work here. This visionary and hallucinatory state is most often to be found in the real. As Russell (1985:127-128) states

> in Breton's works there is a sense that real life is actually present, that it underlies all experience and needs only to be noticed and indulged. Thus, Breton does not state that one must thrust oneself in a romantic quest "any where out of the world", but look toward the world, toward daily life for inspiration and satisfaction.

This is an important aspect of surrealism, and will be discussed in more detail in section 3.3.2.2.3. 82

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82 It is at this point that an important similarity between imagism and surrealism surfaces (despite the fact that the two movements are often regarded as oppositional within the modernist rubric). Skaff (1985:192) indicates this link when he states that both imagism and surrealism emphasise an "immanent mysticism" — a spirituality which has its roots in the real rather than the transcendent. See also sections 3.3.1.2.1 (for imagism) and 3.3.2.2.3 (for surrealism).
Many of the qualities mentioned here have also been mentioned as characteristic of Ginsberg’s Beat poetry (see section 2.2.4). In particular, the surrealists and the Beats share an emphasis on nonrational thought, emotion, intuition and association as modes of apprehension. The two groups also share a belief in a more meaningful spiritual reality beyond the concrete one, and both propagate the use of dreams and hallucinations to access this reality. The Beats and the surrealists wanted to explore all the aspects of the self, and therefore hold in common a view of poetry as a subjective, explorative and visionary medium.

The necessary subjectivity of this process is particularly evident in Ginsberg’s poetry, as is his emphasis on the nonrational, the emotional and the intuition in an exploration of the deeper recesses of the self. The theme of madness is particularly important here, since in Beat poetics the madman is often characterised as the one who has been able to escape the constraints of society and rationality, and to create a channel to the unconscious.

‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) is an exemplary instance of this. It is an extremely subjective poem, in the sense that it explicitly focuses on the author’s personal experience, and particularly the physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of experience rather than the intellectual. It is also an exploration of different levels of consciousness as well as the individual struggle for freedom of experience and expression within a materialistic, intellectualising and restrictive society. The first part of the poem centres on descriptions of individuals searching for meaning in extremes of physical, emotional and spiritual experience. The emphasis is on these three aspects as ways of exploring the self and the unconscious.

For example, the intense physicality of experience is indicated by descriptions of “starving hysterical naked” people (L 1) “dragging themselves through the negro streets ... looking for an angry fix” (L 2) and “ecstatic and insatiate” sex (L 41). The high incidence of verbs depicting vigorous action is also an indication of the importance attached to extremes of physical experience. In particular, the construction of the poem places these verbs in a repetitive configuration which emphasises the actions. For example, from L 48-65, one finds the following constructions at the beginning of each line:
There are many examples of descriptions of extremes of physical, sensual and sexual experience in 'Howl' (CP:126-133), many of which have already been quoted. These descriptions function as an affirmation of the essential vitality of being, in the face of a society which places value on reason above anything else. The words used to describe the physical experience of the poem give a clear indication of the extravagant and intense vigour associated with it. In particular, a very strong emphasis is placed on sexual experience, which, in a sense, is regarded as the direct opposite of intellectual and rational experience.

Emotion is also strongly emphasised as a far more basic and essential constituent of human experience than reason, as in the following lines:

who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons,
who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication,
who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts, (L 33-35)

Spirituality similarly receives a very strong emphasis. The poem is full of descriptions of “incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind” (L 11),
“sun and moon and tree vibrations” (L 13), “visionary indian angels” (L 25), “telepathy and bop kabbalah” (L 24) and “supernatural ecstaticy” (L 26).83

These examples should be sufficient to indicate the sense of physical excess and emotional and spiritual intensity that saturates the poem. These emphases are placed in opposition to the negative evaluation of the intellect. The universities and academies with their “scholars of war” (L 6) are described as being unable to comprehend the scope of experience which includes intense beauty, horror, madness, hallucination, fantasy and creative power (L 6-7). The mind is also linked with the evil, death and destruction associated with Moloch, which annihilates all imagination, sensual pleasure, compassionate emotion and creative and spiritual potential:

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!

Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch!
Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch!
Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky! (L 85-87)

Against Moloch is pitted the individual who strives to revive the neglected, suppressed and destroyed dimensions of experience, who wishes to illuminate the whole of experience, and explore all aspects of consciousness. This process involves an exploration of all extremes of experience, and this obviously conflicts with Moloch’s sanitation and regimentation of experience, so that those who attempt this exploration is labelled mad by societal constrictions.

‘Howl’ (CP:126-133) is dedicated to the poet Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg met when they were both incarcerated in the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute (Watson, 1995:112), and who became a Beat icon for his defiance of norms and conventions. Solomon was also the one who quoted to Ginsberg the surrealist

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83 See also section 4.2.1. The emphasis on sensuality, emotionality and spirituality is also a characteristic of early postmodemism, derived largely from the distrust of metanarratives based on rationalism. Of course, this characteristic of early postmodernism is then also traceable to the already mentioned influence of surrealism on the development of early postmodernism.
Antonin Artaud's words that the lunatic is "a man who has preferred to become what is socially understood as mad rather than forfeit a certain superior idea of human honor" (quoted in Watson, 1995:115). 'Howl' (CP:126-133) is a tribute to this idea, in its depiction of the madman as one who has managed to break free from conventionalised and deadening societal and intellectual strictures, reconnected the body, mind and soul in the pursuit of extremes of experience, and thus found a means of accessing the power of the unconscious and integrating it with the conscious to attain a state of surreality.

'Howl' (CP:126-133) describes some of Solomon's exploits (based on actual occurrences) as follows:

who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy, and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong and amnesia, (L 66-67)

This clearly indicates the conflict between the anti-establishment individual and the conventional society who only wishes to silence such digressions from the norm. In contrast to this restrictive and normative approach is the so-called madman's full and comprehensive experience of all aspects of life. These crazy individuals are the ones "who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space ... and trapped the archangel of the soul" (L 74), "who ate the lamb stew of the imagination" (L 47), "who wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of onions and bad music" (L 48), "yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars" (L 18).

Madness thus becomes a way to resist the domination of the intellect and convention, to explore both the appalling and the heavenly, thus reaching a higher plane of consciousness. The same aim is reflected in the Beats' use of drugs to induce altered states of consciousness, a project which is also evident in Ginsberg's poetry. Poems such as 'Laughing gas' (CP:189-199), 'Mescaline' (CP:228-230), 'Lysergic acid' (CP:231-234) and 'Aether' (CP:242) are only a few of Ginsberg's poems explicitly and deliberately written under the influence of hallucinogenics in an attempt to capture the experience of different dimensions of consciousness. These
poems also exhibit the double-sided nature of the exploration of altered states of consciousness; the fact that these explorations must include both the horrific and the ecstatic. The poem ‘Lysergic acid’ (CP:231-234) depicts such an experience of the horrific:

But at the far end of the universe the million eyed Spyder that hath no name
spinneth of itself endlessly
the monster that is no monster approaches with apples, perfume, railroads,
television, skulls
a universe that eats and drinks itself
blood from my skull
Tibetan creature with hairy breast and Zodiac on my stomach (L 17-22)

On the other hand, ‘Laughing gas’ (CP:189-199) opens out into a mystical apprehension of the totality of the universe:

... a glimpse
out of which the whole
process unfolds this
universe & logically
and symmetrically next
unbuilds it in exact
reverse till you arrive
back at the Nothing
in which one chance
note was originally
struck .. (L 129-139)

In this poem, the moments of apprehension are juxtaposed with the banality of sitting in a dentist’s chair:

the nasal whine of the dentist’s drill
singing against the nostalgic
piano Muzak in the wall
insistent, familiar, penetrating
the teeth, where’ve I heard that
asshole jazz before? (L 5-10)

In this poem the commonplace experience is juxtaposed with the mystical, thus presenting an accurate depiction of the vicissitudes of experience and the
associative flow of apprehension which incorporates the physical as much as the spiritual.

The poems mentioned above are much more complex than this brief discussion gives them credit for, and also increasingly moves towards Zen-Buddhist assumptions of mindlessness and selflessness. Furthermore, there are also many other poems (like ‘Howl’) which were written partially under the influence of hallucinogenics. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, it will suffice to point out Ginsberg’s experimentation with hallucinogenics as a means of attaining a higher, cosmic consciousness and his attempt to recreate this experience in poetry—which clearly establishes a link with surrealism.

Another means of attaining this higher consciousness is through the exploitation of dreams and dream-like states. Ginsberg’s poetry often exhibits this tendency, as for example in the poem ‘Dream record: June 8, 1955’ (CP:124) in which he recounts a dream-conversation with Joan Burroughs, ‘The blue angel’ (CP:54), a dream about Marlene Dietrich, ‘A dream’ (CP:44-45), and many more.

The Beats and the surrealists thus share a common reaction against intellectualisation, and instead propagate nonrational thought, emotion, intuition and association as modes of apprehension. Ginsberg’s poetry also clearly displays the surrealist belief in a more meaningful spiritual reality beyond the concrete one and like the surrealists he propagates the use of dreams and hallucinations to access this reality. The subjectivity of Ginsberg’s Beat poetry may also be linked to the surrealist quality of his work, since his poetry, as much as the surrealists’, emphasises the exploration of all the aspects of the self as well as of the unconscious, even though this might lead to insanity and terror as much as to ecstasy. A related aspect in which Ginsberg’s poetry shows parallels with surrealism is in the view of poetry as an explorative and visionary medium.

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84 As stated previously this is one of the characteristics of surrealism which resurfaces (in slightly altered guises) in early postmodernism. See sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.9.
3.3.2.2.3 The identification of art with life

Despite the highly subjective and often obscure nature of surrealist art, surrealism clearly establishes its aim as the identification of art with life. Breton (1998) describes this relationship as follows:

A certain immediate ambiguity contained in the word surrealism is, in fact, capable of leading one to suppose that it designates I know not what transcendental attitude, while, on the contrary it expresses – and always has expressed for us – a desire to deepen the foundations of the real, to bring about an even clearer and at the same time ever more passionate consciousness of the world perceived by the senses.

Again, the surrealist desire to reconcile opposites, such as internal/external, unreal/real, and art/society, becomes apparent. While surrealism certainly emphasises inner subjective visions, dreams, hallucinations and so forth, it has also always emphasised the integration of these with the reality of existence (Russell, 1985:127-128 and Skaff, 1985:189). This is what Breton (1998) refers to when he talks of surrealism’s attempt to “present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, or finally becoming one.” Russell (1985:122) also stresses this aspect of surrealist aesthetics when he talks of it as an “erotics of daily life, an erotics based on the imaginative and sensual play between internal and external reality, between the individual and the social and phenomenal world”. Blanchot (1995:86) puts it slightly differently when he asserts that the surrealist experience of “true existence” is not

to be sought in exceptional states, in unitary experiences of mystical form: it is at hand, everyone is addicted to it all day and all night long. I think, I suffer, I have the feeling of thinking, of suffering, this feeling is real, it is immediately linked to what I think, to what I suffer, it is an “absolute”.

The surrealist state is thus present just under the surface of reality and everyday experience, from where it is drawn and intensified by the artist’s subjective focus. Surrealism’s mysticism is thus immanent, rather than transcendent, because the sense of mystical illumination is not found in a transcendental realm, but rather in the personal experience of the world (Skaff, 1985:192). On a very basic level, surrealism

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85 Dali’s discovery that realism, pressed to extremes of detail could subvert reality is also related to this reconciliation of opposites (Hughes, 1981:237).
never separates art from life, where it almost invariably finds its origin, thus unifying the psychic and material world.

This basic relationship between art and life is further developed in the surrealists' typically avant-garde belief in the power of art to change life. Russell (1985:122) makes this activist stance clear when he states that "the surrealists developed a programmatic aesthetic and social vision linking poetic discovery and creation with political and scientific praxis in order to provide the imaginative bases for a new style of life". They wanted to create a bridge between their subjective experiences and the general social consciousness (Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:18), thereby giving art a social function (Russell, 1985:131). Surrealist aesthetics is characterised by the belief that art is inseparably related to the condition of humanity in its entirety (Blanchot, 1995:92). Therefore the highly personal, individual and subjective nature of surrealist art is extended to the universal, since all people share the basic spiritual potential which needs to be freed from the bonds of societal institutions. Surrealist artists have always regarded themselves as having a pivotal role in re-awakening this potential in modern life, by reintroducing the power of the imagination:

Ultimately, the surrealists based their model of social revolution on the belief that the artist, being most in touch with the unconscious and its expression, could help create a society of strong, "energetic" individuals who could make their desire-fantasies into reality. Thus, even though surrealist writing often seems hermetic and self-centered, its goal was to provide a model of self-exploration and recovery. (Russell, 1985:132.)

While the surrealists drew from dada their rebellion against bourgeois society and their disinclination to admit the authority of any particular political creed, their belief in the potential for positive social change sets them definitely apart from dada, which "held out no such belief" (Russell, 1985:154).

Of course, this assumption turns out to be slightly more problematic in practice. The surrealist artefact is the product of an intensely personal process drawing on the unconscious of the author. However, the significance of this personal process for the reader (and hence the collective consciousness) is problematic, since "the works are potentially only fossils of a once vital process" (Russell, 1985:150). There is always some kind of tension between the public and private significance of the surrealist artwork, but the surrealists nevertheless believed that their works of art, if only by their strangeness, would force people into perceiving the world in a different way, guiding them towards surreality.
Art and life can both be renewed by contacting the power of the unconscious, refreshing the perception of the world, and including in this perception the connections between chance, memory, desire and coincidence (Hughes, 1981:213).

The surrealists have also therefore never been complacent in the face of life's absurdity or injustice, never seeing art as an escape from life, but rather as a way of improving the quality of life. Surrealism is based on the premise that to propose a new kind of art is also to propose a changed life for men and an alternative revolutionised society (Russell, 1985:148). As Short (1991:303) puts it, surrealist “art is not diversion, but a challenge to the status quo.” The criterion that surrealism applies to a work of art is its susceptibility to provoke a real change in those who encounter it and to call forth an affective and ontological response. Breton’s (quoted in Russell, 1985:151) assertion that the surrealist work serves primarily to “shake up [the audience’s] settled ways of thinking” is typical of this belief. It accomplishes this by creating a new relationship among things, which the audience can only accommodate by expanding their mode of perception.

Surrealism obviously upholds a belief in the power of art, of words and images to act on the world as “magic spells ... as a means of realising desire” (Short, 1991:304). Breton (in Levy, 1968:5) also articulates this belief in the power of art to recover a mythopoetic sensibility when he says that “[t]he poet has come into being to overcome the depressing idea of an irreparable divorce between action and dream”. Surrealism is thus a way of recovering the magical power of words by not regarding language merely as a utilitarian means of communication (Blanchot, 1995:89).

In general, surrealism displays its activist intentions in three ways. The surrealist work stimulates a desire for freedom and alternate life, increases the artists’ and audience’s awareness of the scope of possibility, and also helps to demystify the arbitrary and restrictive values of the bourgeois world (Russell, 1985:159). This project of sensitising people, making them aware of alternative possibilities of perception and action and leading them to self-renewal, lies at the core of surrealism’s activist intentions:

Surrealism, starting fifteen years ago with a discovery that seemed only to involve poetic language, has spread like wildfire, on pursuing its course, not only in art but in life. It has provoked new states of consciousness and overthrown the walls beyond
which it was immemorially supposed to be impossible to see – as is being more and more generally recognized – modified the sensibility, and taken a decisive step towards the unification of the personality ... (Breton, 1998).

Several characteristics of Beat poetry are linked to this idea. Ginsberg’s continual involvement in social issues is typical thereof, as is his belief that the individual experience always has universalising potential (see section 2.2.4.2). The belief in the power of art as a magic tool to recover lost dimensions of emotional and spiritual experience is similarly prevalent in Beat poetry (see section 2.2.4.4).

The idea of an immanent mysticism, in which the real and the mystical converge, is particularly obvious in Ginsberg’s poetry. In an interview he refers to this tendency as the sudden discovery that “everyday light is supernatural” (Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979:385), which simply means that it is in the intensified awareness of the real that the mystical is to be found. Many of Ginsberg’s poems are testimony of this idea. The imagist and haiku style poems, like ‘The bricklayer’s lunch hour’ (CP:4), ‘The trembling of the veil’ (CP:14) and ‘Four haiku’ (CP:137), all share in a belief that the mystical apprehension of the total psychic state is to be found in a concentration on the real – one of the aspects in which imagism and surrealism are similar. However, Ginsberg’s poetics develops this belief beyond the confines of typical imagist poem, in ways which are similar to surrealist aesthetics.

In ‘Footnote to Howl’ (CP:134) the notion that the mystical is to be found in the real is clearly expressed. The poem’s incantatory structure centres on the repetition of the word “holy”, a key word which encompasses the Beat conception of mystical illumination. In this poem, mystical illumination is unequivocally linked with the experience of the real:

Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!
Everyman’s an angel! (L 3)

Holiness is to be found in the body and physical experience (L 2), in the urban landscape (L 9, 13), in the relationships between people and places (L 6, 7, 11), in music and poetry (L 5, 8) in dreams and hallucinations (L 13) and many more. The underlying assumption is that the state of mystical illumination (or the state of surreality) consists of an integration of real and mystical, resulting in an immanent mysticism.
In poems like ‘A strange new cottage in Berkeley’ (CP:135), ‘Sunflower sutra’ (CP:138-139) and ‘Transcription of organ music’ (CP:140-141) this sentiment is further developed. ‘Sunflower sutra’ (CP:138-139) is particularly exemplary of the movement contained in all these poems. From the detailed and intense sensory apprehension of details, the poem moves to a mystical enlightenment. The first thirteen lines of the poem form an elaborate and highly concentrated description of the dead sunflower and its polluted industrial environment. This is followed by a spiritual enlightenment, building up progressively from L 14 and culminating in the last line’s rhapsodic visionary overflow.

This kind of immanent mysticism is typical of Ginsberg’s Beat poetry, and establishes a definite link with surrealism (which is, in this respect, also linked with imagism).

The surrealist tendency to extend the personal to the universal is also apparent in Ginsberg’s Beat poetry, particularly in ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133). From the personal experiences and emotions depicted in the first section of the poem, the poet moves to an indictment of society, and an injunction to the individual to react against the stultifying nature of this society in favour of spiritual and emotional concentration. Society is personified as the cruel and destructive god Moloch:

What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?
Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!
Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judge of men! (L 78-80)

To counter this, Ginsberg’s poem incites the individual to break free from the bonds of materialism and conventionalism:

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers!
Down the river! into the street! (L 93)
This clearly shows the development from the personal to the universal; from his personal experience, the poet reaches a certain kind of universal insight which he attempts to share in his poetry in the hope that others will share in his illumination and thus create a more meaningful life for themselves.

The poem as a piece of performance art has had an extremely influential effect on the youth culture of the time (see sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.3), and has indeed shown that art has the power to influence and shape social conditions. The Beats’ belief in the power of art as a means of recovering the mythopoetic sensibility while resisting and surpassing the limits of convention and reason thus seems to have been valid. The immense role that Ginsberg and his poetry played in later consciousness-raising movements during the sixties, dealing with environmental, humanistic and spiritual issues, also clearly emphasises this belief that art may be used to change and better human existence. Ginsberg’s Beat poetry thus clearly develops the surrealist belief that the personal experience can be extended to the universal, and that this universalisation has the potential to provoke physical and spiritual change in people’s perception and behaviour.

Ginsberg’s Beat poetry furthermore also displays the related surrealist characteristic of activism. Like surrealism, Beat aesthetics aims to make a difference to the social and communal life by giving art a definite role within the social domain. Many of Ginsberg’s Beat poems, like ‘Howl’ (CP:126-133), ‘America’ (CP:146-148), ‘Death to Van Gogh’s ear!’ (CP:167-170) and ‘Europe! Europe!’ (CP:171-173) are activist poems, written with the deliberate intent of provoking social change. Together with his tireless involvement in activist movements, this type of poetry is a clear development of the surrealist (and generally avant-garde) belief in the activist potential and responsibility of art.88

The surrealist identification of art with life thus finds its expression in Ginsberg’s poetry on several levels. Not only is the mystical and the real inextricably linked, but the personal experience also provides the basis for a holistic social vision characterised by the possibility for change and rejuvenation.

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88 Since this activist stance is also one of the characteristics of early postmodernism, the poems mentioned here will be discussed in more detail in the relevant section dealing with postmodernism (section 4.2.7).
From the above it should be obvious that the surrealist work of art is still a means rather than the end of creative activity. Thus it is almost immaterial to look for defining surrealist styles or techniques. That which makes a work of art surrealist is something which lies beyond style or technique, and is rather to be found in the artist's drive for spiritual emancipation (Short, 1991:306). For this reason it is virtually impossible to abstract any defining stylistic quality from the surrealist approach, and the surrealists experimented with a variety of techniques, from total automatism to the crafting of self-reflective artifices (Russell, 1985:141), all of which aimed to provoke the surrealist state. However, there are two general stylistic aspects which seem important and are particularly relevant to this dissertation: the use of automatic writing, and the surrealist use of the image.

3.3.2.2.4 Automatic writing

Blanchot (1995:85) regards automatic writing or écriture automatique as one of the important contributions of surrealism, and its importance is already evident in Breton's (1998) definition of surrealism as "pure psychic automatism ... thought dictated without any control by logic, beyond any aesthetic or ethical considerations". Automatic writing is an approach to writing loosely connected to Freud's technique of association, yet again indicating the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on surrealism (Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:16). Breton (quoted in Tytell, 1979:227) defines it as "monologues spoken as rapidly as possible without any interruption on the part of the cerebral faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was as closely as possible akin to spoken thought."90

This psychic automatism proposes to express the mind's actual functioning in the absence of controls like reason, or any superimposed moral or aesthetic concern (Russell, 1985:142). Any rational "correction" of the psychic material is rejected in principle, in favour of a free associative play (Van Gorp et al., 1986:109). Breton (1998) points out that surrealist artists reject any "processes of filtering", instead

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89 Russell (1985:142) points out that automatic writing is the dominant technique in the earlier (or intuitive) phase of surrealism. The later phase is characterised by deliberate and conscious emulation of what writers believed to be the unconscious process.

90 See Breton (1998) for a discussion of how he first chanced on the idea of automatic writing and the nature and effects of his first automatic experiments (together with Philippe Soupault).
wanting to be "silent receptacles" and "modest registering machines". There is thus also a measure of self-effacement in surrealism, but at the same time it is a highly subjective and personal art.\footnote{This paradox is also shared by imagist writing, where the idea is to record perceptions in an objective manner – while the perception remains undeniably subjective. See section 3.3.1.2.1.}

The notion of automatic writing integrates the surrealist emphasis on spontaneity and its view of art as the expression of personal mind-flow, emotion and intuition. It also emphasises the importance of freedom in the creative process, since it provides a sense of liberation from "a false sense of logic and a narrow view of critical judgment" as well as from "the arbitrary and restrictive conventions of realism" (Russell, 1985:143). The technique of automatic writing is thus a way of eliciting the inner flux of the mind as constitutive of the creative process, and is an attempt to create "windows into the self, messages about the other side" (Germain, 1987:29). As such, automatic writing provides contact with the repressed truer self (Russell, 1985:145).

Despite the random and subjective products of automatic art, surrealism strongly believes that this randomness contains profound meaning and order (Russell, 1985:145), revealing the true nature of things. Blanchet (1995:86) points out that even though automatic writing is "a weapon against reflection and language" (the traditional means to knowledge and understanding), it also creates a new "way of knowledge, and opens a new unlimited belief in words".

Automatic writing has a curious relationship with language. In one sense, it is about the freedom of language, as much as it is about the freedom of the self, and indeed, these two issues become almost indistinguishable in the process of automatic writing, so that "the words and my freedom are now no more than one. I slide into the word, it keeps my imprint, and it is my imprinted reality ..." (Blanchot, 1995:88). In another sense the freedom of words means that words become free for themselves: they no longer depend exclusively on things that they express, they act on their own account, they play, and, as Breton says, "they make love." Surrealists became well aware – and they made use of it admirably – of the strange nature of words: they saw that words have their own spontaneity ... Surrealists understand, moreover, that language is not
an inart thing: it has a life of its own, and a latent power that escapes us (Blanchot, 1995:88).

On the other hand though, it is interesting to note that most surrealist texts are not completely without order, since they are usually fairly grammatical. This may of course be construed as an intrusion of the conscious mind, but the surrealists maintained that automatic writing represented the meeting and reconciliation of the opposites of consciousness and unconsciousness, and not the total dominance of the unconscious:

The implicit collaboration in these texts between the unconscious creation and juxtaposition of imagery and the conscious – or at least unself-conscious – use of grammatical and narrative conventions signified for the early surrealists the promise of the creative interaction of the two aspects of the mind and the consequent overcoming of the narrow, positivist conception of reality. (Russell, 1985:145.)

The surrealist belief that the constant flow of unconscious images contains some kind of essential truth or beauty, often experienced as a static moment of illumination, creates a kind of paradoxical situation. On the one hand the surrealist experience is presented as an unbroken flow of images and sensations, but on the other it is also often regarded as a moment of intense illumination in which all opposites fuse in the absolute, surreal state of totality (Russell, 1985:147). This paradox is basic to surrealism, and yet again, surrealist art is an attempt to reconcile the two, or at least hold them in suspension:

In effect, the surrealist writer describes a condition of awareness of the ceaseless flow of images, words, and effective responses to phenomena and ideas, yet is in constant anticipation of the moment of surprise in which the union of self and world will be unveiled. (Russell, 1985:147.)

The surrealist technique of automatic writing has had a definite influence on Ginsberg’s poetry. His dictum of “first thought, best thought” (CP:xx) is typical of this, as is his emphasis on and belief in Kerouac’s technique of spontaneous prose (see section 2.2.4.1). In his 1924 manifesto, Breton (quoted in Germain, 1987:29-30) describes the technique of automatic writing in the following way:

Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everybody else. Keep reminding yourself
that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you've written and be tempted to reread what you've written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard...

Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur.

One is struck by the obvious similarity between this statement and those contained in Kerouac's 'Essentials of spontaneous prose' (see section 2.2.4.1).

The Beats' entire emphasis on spontaneity and on the exploration of the subjective mind in all its dimensions may be seen to relate to the surrealist notion of automatic writing as a means to access the unconscious through free association. It is also linked to the notion of organic unity between form and content, both being determined by the flux of association. In this respect, another of Ginsberg's famous dictums, "mind is shapely, art is shapely" (CP:xx), seems particularly relevant.

It would be inaccurate to relate all of Ginsberg's Beat poetry to the particularly surrealist notion of automatic writing, although his poetry certainly shares the characteristics of spontaneity and freedom of expression with this concept. 'Howl' (CP:126-133) was written with no revision at all, and the first and second sections partly under the influence of hallucinogenics (Watson, 1995:181). This clearly shows in the mind-flow quality of some of the lines, the spontaneous, impulsive follow-on of thoughts and the organic unity of content and form evident in the poem (already discussed in sections 2.2.4.1 and 3.2.1.2). However, 'Howl' (CP:126-133) is definitely not the only poem written in a style which may be linked to the surrealist technique of automatic writing. Much of Ginsberg's Beat poetry is written in the same style, like 'A supermarket in California' (CP:136), 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139), 'Afternoon Seattle' (CP:150), 'Ready to roll' (CP:159), 'POEM Rocket' (CP:163-164), 'The names' (CP:176-179), 'Laughing gas' (CP:189-199) and many more.

The notion of the freedom of words to play and "make love" is also particularly important in Ginsberg's Beat poetry. Language is freed from all limitations, so to liberate its expressive potential. All of the poems mentioned above are exemplary of this characteristic, since their formal freedom allows the words as much as the thoughts to interact and combine in startling and unexplored relationships. This tendency is foregrounded in a poem like 'Fie my fum' (CP:23), an exemplary
instance of words playing. The poem is an almost random associative game with words:

Ark my darkness,
Rack my larks,
Bleak my lurking,
Lark my looks,

Start my Arden,
Gate my shades,
Silk my garden,
Rose my days, (L 9-16)

Despite the fact that this poem seems to be a mere whimsical exploration of words, its very whimsicality and free associative expression creates a space from which a deeper personal-universal truth may emerge – which Ginsberg has described as having to do with the process of illumination. The surrealist idea that free association (of images and words) would show up crucial unconscious forces is thus also present in Ginsberg’s Beat poetry.

Ginsberg’s Beat poetry clearly assimilates many of the tendencies present in surrealist automatic writing, such as spontaneity, association and freedom. His poetry is also similar to surrealist aesthetics in the sense that it finds in these processes a means of revealing hitherto unexplored and unexpressed regions of experience.

3.3.2.2.5 The surrealist image

Another important recurrent surrealist technique has to do with the use of the image, which is particularly interesting considering the imagist influence in Ginsberg’s poetry. Surrealism believes that the associative poetic or plastic image, especially when it brings together a pair of elements which reason would regard as having nothing in common, often generates a mysterious luminosity and appears to be inexplicably appropriate, even inevitable, containing a “privileged moment of existence” (Short, 1991:302-303). Pierre Reverdy, one of Breton’s early artistic influences, makes the juxtapositional nature of the surrealist image clear:

92 See section 4.2.8 for a more extensive discussion of this poem and its implications.
The image is a pure creation of the mind,
It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.
The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be – the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.
(Reverdy, quoted in Russell, 1985:135.)

The basic surrealist image is thus a kind of metaphor, through which two usually incongruent experiences are dislodged from their customary context and fused into a new combination, created by juxtaposition or metamorphosis (Skaff, 1985:189). However, this surprising juxtaposition of disparate realities is created not by conscious reason, but by unconscious processes (Russell, 1985:137). This accounts for the strange beauty of surrealist art, a beauty born from “unexpected meetings of words, sound, image, thing, person” (Hughes, 1981:221). Comte de Lautréamont’s famous description of beauty as “the chance encounter, on an operating table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella” (quoted in Hughes, 1981:221) is typical of this juxtapositional creation of images.

This unconsciously created juxtaposition creates a spark of illumination, a gap filled with imaginative possibility, effected by pushing both artist and audience into a new mode of perception from which a unified vision, integrating the bewildering contradictory elements, emerges (Russell, 1985:135, 137 and Skaff, 1985:189-191). The movement is thus from perception, to dislocation, to insight, to ecstasy – again confirming the immanent mysticism characterising surrealism (Skaff, 1985:195). Ideally, the surrealist artwork is the reconciliation of opposites into unity, and therefore consists of both disruption or bewilderment and unification or illumination:

Once liberated from the purely conscious, empirical world, these previously isolated components of reality form a new whole which, revealing an essential, unsuspected relation between certain elements of reality, stirs his unconscious and provides him with an experience of that unifying, subliminal region. In this way, the Surrealists

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93 The emphasis on unconscious processes was transmitted to surrealism via dada, but there is a definite difference between the two movements’ emphasis on the unconscious process of the creation of images. Whereas dada’s preference for the unconscious, instinctual and random juxtaposition of images originated mostly from an ironic love of the gratuitous and a desire to demystify accepted modes of thought and expression, the surrealists found inspiration and illumination in the unconscious and apparently random juxtaposition of images (Russell, 1985:136).
emphasize the essence of metaphor, unification, in their work through the
disparateness of the elements being united. Significantly, the metaphorical implies that
the marvelous, the mystical, is present in this world, and has been unavailable only
because man has limited his perception of phenomenal reality. (Skaff, 1985:190.)

The source of these “splendid and delirious images” (Dali, in Levy, 1968:6) is the
pure unconscious. For this reason, the surrealist image has a double function. It
directs “our attention alternately to the immediate experience of surprise and marvel
evoked by the image and beyond it to the unarticulated universe of desire, phenomena, and experience from which it emerges ...” (Russell, 1985:141).

These ideas show some similarity to the imagist belief that the juxtaposition of two
overtly unrelated images creates a space for the sensation of the holistic experience
of the moment. It is also connected to the haiku, where the juxtaposition of sensory
images reveals a spiritual state of mind, and to Ginsberg’s interpretation of
Cézanne’s petites sensations wherein a mystical experience is contained. Surrealism
thus also operates on the principle of the concrete containing the abstract or the
spiritual, but this link is made much stronger than in imagist poetry, by locating the
creation of the juxtapositional image very definitely in the unconscious, which also
contributes to the often obscure, fantastic and grotesque nature of surrealist images.
The surrealist notion of the image is thus a much more overtly subjective and
personal one than in imagism, a development well suited to Ginsberg’s approach. It
also emphasises the highly spiritual nature of the image (particularly obvious in the
haiku), which is further enforced by the fact that, like the Beats, the surrealists flirted
with Oriental philosophy, religion and mysticism, and believed that they had found
spiritual guidance in Buddha (Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 1979:15).

Furthermore, surrealism (like imagism) refuses to offer any explanation for the often
strange juxtaposition and linking of images, because

the primary concept is alive and whole. The subsequent explanation by description is
devious and often self-destructive. The function of the poet is to communicate the
immaculate primary concept. He cannot attempt to explain his intuition, but by means
of the appropriate, penetrating and poignant symbol he arouses a corresponding
intuition in others (Levy, 1968:7).
The surrealist image is a kind of inspirational short circuit (see Russell, 1985:133), and its origins is not to be found in anything reasonable. Therefore it can also not be explained by reason, but only apprehended by intuition, which reveals the totality contained in the juxtaposition of disparate images: “The short circuit that occurred when images interacted without the agency of the critical consciousness was the surrealists’ aesthetic focus – the creation of metaphor, and by extension, the process of associative cognition and perception.” (Russell, 1985:134.)

Surrealist images often appear in chains, linked by associative (though often apparently incongruous) connections within the flow of spontaneous automatic writing — thus increasing their bewildering effect (Russell, 1985:137). In this regard, the paradox of the flowing process of association combined with the static moment of illumination (already discussed in the previous section) is particularly important. The surrealist style of writing integrates both these aspects in its use of continually flowing chains of juxtapositional images, which open up into an apprehension of luminous totality – the state of surreality.

The spontaneous juxtapositional adding of images, often obscure, fantastic or grotesque, in continuous linked chains, is a particular characteristic of Ginsberg’s poetry which might be traced back to a surrealist influence. Compare for example the following lines from ‘Howl’ (CP: 126-133):

who coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology,

(...) who cooked rotten animals lung heart feet borsht & tortillas dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom,

who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg,

who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,

(...) who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality, (L 50-56)
The same kind of surreal images are evident in the poem ‘Paterson’ (CP:40-41), in which the speaker says that he wants to be a

streetcorner Evangel in front of City Hall, surrounded by statues of agonized lions,
with a mouthful of shit, and the hair raising on my scalp,
screaming and dancing in praise of Eternity annihilating the sidewalk, annihilating reality,
screaming and dancing against the orchestra in the destructible ballroom of the world, (L 22-25)

Many of these images are incongruous, irrational and obscure, as well as fantastic or horrific, thus indicating their origins in the unconscious rather than in reason. The apparently irrational chain-like linking of images further suggests the approximation of mind-flow, the associative process by which the psyche works. This is presented in the poem without the interference of the intellectual demand for logical coherence. Rather, the coherence in poems such as these depends on the associative flow of the images, which has a perverse unconscious “logic” of its own. However, the poet never needs to explain these images, since they reveal their own meaning, and any explanation would only obfuscate the illuminating personal potential of the images.

On a more basic level, the juxtaposition of individual words to form an image, like “hydrogen jukebox” from ‘Howl’ (L 15) may also be seen as surrealist, not only in the incongruity of the juxtaposition, but also in the assumption that this juxtaposition, coming from the unconscious, reveals a certain unspeakable meaning, a spiritual-emotional opalescence that flickers in the space between the two word-images. Since this aspect has already been discussed in sections 3.2.1.1.1, 3.2.1.1.2 and 3.2.1.2, it will not be given any more attention here.

Thus the surrealist influence in Ginsberg’s poetry may account for the ways in which he surpassed the early imagist use of the image. In his poetry the image is an explicit fusion of the unconscious and objective worlds, and is therefore even more obscure, fantastic and sometimes grotesque than the imagist image could ever be. The linking of images without any imposition of logical structure is also related to the surrealist attempt to approximate the associative flow of the mind in poetry, without allowing the reason to dictate form or acceptability. Lastly, the surrealist notion of the image as an irrational juxtaposition which reveals a mysterious luminosity of some
kind of experiential or spiritual truth is also an idea which is typical of Ginsberg's poetics.

3.3.2.2.6 The lyrical celebration of love and sexuality

Two other general and related aspects of surrealist poetry deserve attention here, since there seems to be an obvious relationship to Ginsberg's poetry: the emphasis on and exploration of love and sexuality, articulated in lyrical form. Surrealism exalts love as the archetypal surrealist act because it brings about the seemingly impossible fusion of the self with the other, freeing the self from the bounds of rationality, and also because it is the supreme manifestation of the pleasure principle (Short, 1991:308). Skaff (1985:192) points out that surrealism embraces a kind of "cult of love", which functions as "a source of insight into an union with the universe". Love and sex are further also important because they evoke in "the adult, conscious individual states of imaginative and sensual intensity usually found only in dream and fantasy" (Russell, 1985:138). Surrealism believes that the imagination can be set free by the devotional state of love – an idea probably assimilated from the mediaeval concept of courtly love (Hughes, 1981:249). As Alquié (1965:84-85) puts it,

lovemotion-love) immediately takes first place in Surrealist preoccupations. In it are found once more all the prodigies of the Universe, all the powers of consciousness, all the agitation of feeling. It effects the supreme synthesis of subjective and objective .... It is from love that the surrealists expect the great revelation.

This almost obsessive, fixational conception of love (Hughes, 1981:249) is also partially the reason why much surrealist art is so fascinated with the image of woman, which is regarded as a separate, mysterious being but also a conductive element between the poetic mind and the world, leading to a kind of mystical union (Russell, 1985:138-139).94

For these reasons, surrealist art is often a celebration of love and sexuality, sometimes in a very frank and explicit manner. Apart from celebrations of love and sexuality, surrealist art also often contains images of sexual violence (Hughes, 1985:192).

94 See Caws (1985) for an extensive discussion of female embodiment in surrealist art.
1981:252) – a necessary consequence of the exploration of the darker sides of the unconscious and its desires and fears.95

There is thus also an element of deliberate provocation and shock value present in the surrealist exploration of love and sexuality (Hughes, 1981:238). As the main precinct of social taboo, sex is an important focus of surrealist art, and the surrealist quest for freedom is also carried through to the level of sexual freedom (Hughes, 1981:249). However, as should already be apparent from the surrealist objectification of the female body96, surrealism “was only interested in one kind of sexual freedom, the man’s, and heterosexual man’s at that. Breton had an intense loathing of homosexuality” (Hughes, 1981:249). The surrealist quest for sexual freedom thus obviously centres on the heterosexual male – an aspect to which Ginsberg’s emphasis on homosexual sexuality adds a much wider scope.

It is important that sex is never regarded as merely a physical act, but also as an emotional and spiritual one. As Short (1991:308) states, surrealist poetry is a celebration of love which confers sacredness on what might ordinarily be regarded as profane sensuality. Ginsberg’s emphasis on the body as the origin of true spirituality links with this (see Clark, 1970:160-161), as does his perpetual return to love and sexuality as a crucial dimension of ontological awareness and freedom.

All of the above aspects are apparent in ‘Love poem on theme by Whitman’ (CP:115). Here the physical act of love is intimately linked to an emotional and spiritual awareness. The poem starts with a description of physical love:

I’ll go into the bedroom silently and lie down between the bridegroom and the bride, those bodies fallen from heaven stretched out waiting naked and restless, arms resting over their eyes in the darkness, bury my face in their shoulders and breasts, breathing their skin, and stroke and kiss neck and mouth and make back be open and known, legs raised up crook’d to receive, cock in the darkness driven tormented and attacking

95 See Hughes (1981:249-254) for examples of such surrealist artworks.
96 See Caws (1985). Feminist critiques of surrealist art have focused very much on the objectification of women in surrealism. Hughes (1981:249) describes the potential or actual oppressiveness of this objectification when he states that “the image of woman in Surrealist art had no real face: she was always on a pedestal or in chains. Her preferred form was a mannequin ...”
roused up from hole to itching head,
bodies locked shuddering naked, hot hips and buttocks screwed into each other
and eyes, eyes glinting and charming, widening into looks and abandon,
and moans of movement, voice, hands in air, hands between thighs,
hands in moisture on softened hips, throbbing contraction of bellies
till the white come flow in the swirling sheets, (L 1-12)

This physical, sexual experience is then linked to a more emotional and even spiritual dimension:

and the bride cry for forgiveness, and the groom be covered with tears of passion and compassion,
and I rise up from the bed replenished with last intimate gestures and kisses of farewell –
all before the mind wakes, behind shades and closed doors in a darkened house (L 13-15)

The same kind of celebration of the sexual act as encompassing more than physical experience is also apparent in the poem 'Many loves' (already discussed in section 3.2.1.2). This poem also indicates something of the ecstatic dream-like state that accompanies love and sex, the absolute passion in which self and other are fused, where the rational self gets lost in another, irrational world. This almost trance-like state is the state of consciousness that the surrealist aspires to, and love and sex are two of the most crucial ways in which it may be achieved. This idea is most strikingly articulated in 'Song' (CP:111-112):

No rest
without love,
no sleep
without dreams
of love –
be mad or chill
obsessed with angels
or machines,
the final wish
is love
– cannot be bitter
cannot deny,
cannot withhold
if denied:
The body as the locus of all dimensions of experience – physical, emotional and spiritual – is thus clearly emphasised in Ginsberg’s poetry. As he points out in ‘Footnote to Howl’ (CP:134), the body is an essential domain of holiness: “The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!” (L 2) and “Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!” (L 14). The body is thus clearly linked to the spiritual characteristics of forgiveness, charity, faith and love, and is an essential (if not the only) means of experiencing and expressing these characteristics.

Ginsberg’s emphasis on the holistic nature of experience thus compels him to fuse body, mind and soul in the poetic expression of experience. This becomes very apparent in his continual return to and treatment of the themes of love and sexuality. Love and sex become ways of transcending the self and of accessing other dimensions of consciousness. It should also be evident that the most appropriate poetic mode for exploring such other dimensions of consciousness would be the lyric, and indeed, most surrealist poetry is lyrical, though sometimes with strong narrative elements (Russell, 1985:149). Similarly, Ginsberg’s poetry is also predominantly lyrical. However, as has already been argued in section 3.2.1.2, much
of Ginsberg's poetry is a mixture of lyric and epic styles, which becomes another way of exploring all dimensions of experience both in terms of momentariness and in terms of continuity.

### 3.3.2.3 Ginsberg and surrealism: summary

Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry shares several important characteristics with surrealist aesthetics. Both are revolts against the stultifying social conventions of Western civilisation, and emphasise the freedom and potential of the individual. Beat poetry and surrealism further share an emphasis on emotion, intuition, spirituality as well as sexuality rather than utilitarian reason. Both groups aim to extend personal visionary poetic expression to the universal, so to open up alternative spiritual possibilities for individuals as well as society and encourage the full exploitation of the complexity of being. To create an awareness of the richness of these possibilities, surrealism and Beat aesthetics rely on techniques such as automatic or spontaneous writing and juxtapositional images.

### 3.3.3 In conclusion: Ginsberg’s Beat poetry and modernism

Ginsberg's Beat poetics thus involves an assimilation of ideas drawn from (apparently) oppositional avant-garde modernist movements like imagism and surrealism. This assimilation is effected through firstly supplementing the perceived limitations of the one with the strengths of the other (such as adding surrealism's explicit personal-social-spiritual concerns to imagist detachment), and secondly by making latent similarities between the two more obvious (such as the containment of the abstract in the concrete image in both imagism and surrealism). Thus the Beats' reaction against high modernist aesthetics lead them back to the avant-garde origins of modernism, constructing a new aesthetics from the assimilation of these movements' ideas with an own artistic vision and desire for innovation.

As discussed in section 2.4.3, this rejection of high modernism in favour of a return to the avant-garde origins of modernism also inaugurates the early phase of postmodernism. The Beats' rejection of high modernism and their adaptation of early modernist avant-garde ideas thus place them within a possible early postmodernist paradigm, further enforced by the fact that early postmodernism in particular bears many (displaced) traces of surrealism.
The following chapter will investigate the transitional nature and role of Ginsberg's Beat poetry in the development from modernism to postmodernism. The contention is that Beat poetry not only displays characteristics which link it with early postmodernism, but is in itself a powerful force which contributed to this transition.