

4. Beyond modernism: Ginsberg's Beat poetry and postmodernism

4.1 Introduction

In the run of section 2.4 some preliminary comments on the relationship between Beat poetry and the development of postmodernism in America were made. Several critics, like Calinescu (1987a:297), Russell (1985:242) and Huysen (1986:188) believe that the origins of postmodernism can be traced to the simultaneous development of literary reactions against high modernism and social countercultural movements in America during the 1950s. Calinescu (1987a:297) makes this particularly clear when he states that the development of postmodernism was initiated in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s by a group of poets' reaction against high modernism, which also included an affinity with countercultural movements. In this process Beat literature is a crucial influence, as all three critics mentioned above also point out. The Beats' reaction against high modernism (as discussed in section 3.2) thus constitutes the historical core of postmodernism. Furthermore, early postmodernism shows a particular affinity with earlier, marginalised (in the American context) modernist avant-garde movements, like surrealism and dadaism – part of the expressionist tendency of modernism (see section 2.3.5). This tendency is particularly apparent in Beat poetry (as discussed in section 3.3.2), which establishes another preliminary link with early postmodernism. Lastly, the Beats' return to the avant-garde also parallels postmodernism's return to the avant-garde origins of modernism (see section 2.4.3). Thus the Beats' reaction against classical high modernism becomes the first step in the movement beyond modernism. The second step is their adaptation and reworking of other, earlier modernist practices, rediscovered by postmodernism.

The following section will discuss the position of Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry in terms of its relationship to postmodernism. Stevens' (1997) comment that Ginsberg's Beat poetry may be regarded as early postmodernist will be used as a point of departure, and this section sets out to investigate this supposition in more detail. The aim is not to prove that Ginsberg's Beat poetry is finally and/or definitively

postmodernist, but rather to show in which ways his poetry may be regarded as having a transitional influence, moving beyond modernism towards a postmodernist poetics.

However, as already pointed out, postmodernism assumes many guises, both diachronically and synchronically speaking. Therefore it is necessary to have clarity on two important issues. Firstly, the chronology of Beat poetry as well as its acknowledged and already substantiated reaction against high modernism almost automatically places it in the **early phase** of postmodernism which is characterised as an attempt to revitalise the heritage of the European avant-garde and give it a particularly American form, by foregrounding conflict, iconoclasm, optimism and populism (see section 2.4.4). This early form has undergone various transformations over time, which, however, are not relevant here, since this section aims to place Ginsberg's Beat poetry at the origins or earliest development of postmodernism.

Secondly, there are also various trends simultaneously present within postmodernism, as pointed out in section 2.4.4. Obviously Ginsberg's Beat poetry will only link with some of these strains. In particular, the following section will assume and argue that Beat poetry is part of Graff's (1979:55-59) celebratory strain of postmodernism and Russell's (1985:248-249) avant-garde tendency within postmodernism, as opposed to the more self-reflexive, serious, desperate and even apocalyptic strains within postmodernism.

4.2 Postmodernist tendencies in Ginsberg's Beat poetry

The framework for the discussion in this section builds on the salient characteristics of postmodernism identified in section 2.4.6. This section briefly discusses these characteristics and analyses several of Ginsberg's Beat poems in terms of this model of early postmodernism, to indicate the ways in which Ginsberg's Beat poetry bridges the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

4.2.1 The suspicion of metanarratives

Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. –
Jean-Francois Lyotard –

Lyotard's (1984:xxiv) definition of postmodernism as the incredulity towards metanarratives has proved extremely influential. He uses the term *modern* to

designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace (Lyotard, 1984:xxiii-xxiv).

While modernism is based on a simultaneous acceptance **and** problematisation of Enlightenment values or grand narratives such as the primacy of reason, the desire and possibility for knowledge and mastery of the self and the world, and the idea of human progress and liberation, postmodernism is based on the loss of confidence in such metanarratives (Wheale, 1995:6-9; Brooker, 1991:153; Turner, 1994:11; Russell, 1985:62 and Liebenberg, 1988:274-275).

What this implies for postmodernist art is that it is essentially counterhegemonic, deconstructionist, de-centering and demystifying (Brooker, 1991:156; Hutcheon, 1988:12, 57 and Russell, 1985:247). It overthrows and undermines a variety of related metanarratives, such as that of the masculine performing and ordering ego (Altieri, 1996:773), the dominance of order, meaning, control and identity (Russell, 1985:247), or the assumed superiority of the uniform, the patriarchal, the rational and the hierarchical (Turner, 1994:11) – instead proposing difference, heterogeneity and contradiction.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Hutcheon (1988:57) summarises all of this when stating that postmodernism "questions the entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as

In a way, then, the suspicion of metanarratives lies at the core of many of the characteristics of postmodernism. It gives rise to postmodernism's exploration of discontinuity and interrelatedness, of intertextuality, fragmentation, multiplicity and the workings of chance and randomness, instead of the agonised preoccupation with the status and meaning of the text (Fokkema, 1983:43-44 and Calinescu, 1987a:270). Postmodernist art is open, playful, disjunctive, indeterminate and provisional, made up of fragments, absences and fractures (Hassan, 1993:154) or infused with strategies such as contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess and short circuit (Lodge, 1977:229-239). Hassan (1993:152) regards indeterminacy⁹⁸ as one of the main characteristics of postmodernism, stating that it indicates

a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche – the entire realm of discourse in the West. In literature alone our ideas of author, audience, reading, writing, book, genre, critical theory, and of literature itself, have all suddenly become questionable (Hassan, 1993:153).

Elsewhere, he states that indeterminacies, fragmentation and decanonisation are typical of postmodernism (Hassan, 1987:18-19), all in service of subverting conventions of authority and delegitimising the master-codes of society.

What happens here is that previously fixed categories – like *self*, *world*, *text* and *story* – are thrown open to multiple and infinite possibilities (Fokkema, 1983:43-53 and McHale, 1997:6-7). Therefore the epistemological quest of modernism becomes the ontological exploration of postmodernism, and postmodernism questions the very existence of categories which in modernism were only interrogated in terms of their meaning (Laclau, 1993:332).

However, the incredulity of metanarratives should not necessarily be regarded in a negative light. Hassan (1997:18), referring to the work of architect and critic Charles Jencks, states that metanarratives have not necessarily ended, but have rather become contested, and are now seen in their plurality. This prompts an awareness

liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin".

⁹⁸ In Hassan's (1993:152) typology, indeterminacy together with immanence form the main tendency of postmodernism, which he terms *indetermanence*.

of the fullness of different meanings and diverse ways of life – one of the most positive manifestations of postmodernism.

Ginsberg's Beat poetry embodies the postmodernist distrust of metanarratives in several ways, particularly since it is essentially counterhegemonic, de-centering and demystifying. In particular, it is opposed to such dominant metanarratives as the primacy of reason over emotional and physical experience, and the primacy of the uniform, the hierarchical and the patriarchal over diversity, discontinuity and chaos.

Beat poetry's counterhegemonic resistance of principles of order, control, reason and hierarchy manifests itself primarily on two levels. On an **individual** level, Beat poetry is counterhegemonic in the sense that it resists the traditional definition of the self as fixed point of identity, primarily defined by virtue of its capacity to reason. Instead it plays with the notion of self, arguing that transitory physical and emotional experience, together with mystical and visionary states, might be a more appropriate locus for the self. On a **social** level, the counterhegemonic nature of Beat poetry is apparent from its resistance against social control and the dominance of a particular group and its ideology. It contests any view of society as being monolithic and resists totalization, instead celebrating plurality and diversity.⁹⁹

From a general perspective, there are many of Ginsberg's Beat poems which reflect the resistance against totalizing metanarratives, and the simultaneous embracing of principles such as discontinuity, interrelatedness, intertextuality, fragmentation, multiplicity, chance, randomness, openness and playfulness. These aspects are manifested on the level of both content and form.

Beat poetry expresses itself against monolithic views of diverse dimensions of existence. 'Howl' (CP:126-133) is exemplary of this. The entire poem is an outcry against the stultifying conventional assumptions of middle-class America – personified as the god Moloch. In one sense, Moloch becomes an illustration of the metanarratives on which Western society is constructed. Moloch is "the Mind" (L 84),

⁹⁹ The more individual nature of the Beats' counterhegemonic impulse has bearing on section 4.2.5, and will therefore not be discussed here in any further detail. Furthermore, the reaction against more particular metanarratives, such as the dominance of reason, is related to sections 4.2.9, which deals with irrationality, immediacy and intensity, and more extensive discussions of this issue can be found in these sections.

which destroys "brains and imagination" (L 78), in which the self is "a consciousness without a body" whose fate is "a cloud of sexless hydrogen" (L 84). Moloch is also the desire for progress, no matter what the consequences:

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!

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! (L 82-84)

This second section of 'Howl' (CP:126-133) thus exposes some of the basic metanarratives on which Western society is based, such as the primacy of reason over the body, emotion and spirituality, and the desire for and belief in progress through human technological innovation, regardless of the human cost. While these metanarratives would traditionally have gone unchallenged, and their assumptions tacitly and positively accepted, Ginsberg's poem follows the postmodernist tendency of questioning and undermining these assumptions. It exposes the influences and results of these metanarratives as negative and destructive, instead of presenting it as the accepted ideal to be aspired to. It points out that the emphasis on the mind is harmful to other dimensions of human existence which may in fact be more crucial than reason, and simultaneously shows the results of a social ethics based on the concomitant dominance of reason and progress. Words like "solitude", "filth", "ugliness", "screaming", "sobbing", "weeping" (L 79), "loveless" (L 80), "soulless" (L 81) and "sorrows" (L 81) are used to describe a terrifying society which consists of "Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!" (L 87).

The poem thus rejects the hegemony of these basic metanarratives of Western culture as numbing, stifling and ultimately destructive. Its counterhegemonic gesture consists of pushing that which has been marginalised and hidden by these metanarratives to the foreground. Instead of the dominance of order and reason, the poem emphasises extremities of chaotic and intense experience: physical, emotional

and spiritual.¹⁰⁰ All of these experiences are depicted in terms of an absence of control, since control implies some kind of hierarchical structuring of experience. The absolute spontaneity of the moment of experience becomes crucial, without controlling influences from either reason or from social conventions.

In this way the poem depicts pure, raw, disordered emotional, spiritual, visionary and sensual experience as more essential to human existence than intellectually analysed and hierarchised experience, thus subverting the dominance of metanarratives which rely on the primacy of reason, order and control.

It thus becomes apparent that 'Howl' (CP:126-133), the definitive Beat poem, is indeed immersed in the postmodernist questioning of metanarratives, in particular metanarratives which relate to the primacy of control, order, and intellectual reason. In the process the poem makes a deconstructionist move by inverting the hierarchy and placing the repressed terms (spirit, emotion, body) in the primary position. Furthermore, the poem focuses very much on local narratives, on particulars of individual stories and experiences, thus creating a kind of experiential basis for the criticism of metanarratives, instead of a metaphysical one. This is true of many other Beat poems, such as 'The bricklayer's lunch hour' (CP:4), 'Paterson' (CP:40-41), 'America' (CP:146-148), 'Fragment 1956' (CP:149) and 'Many loves' (CP:156-158). However, as already pointed out, the suspicion of metanarratives relates to many other characteristics of postmodernism still to be discussed, and therefore these poems will be discussed in more detail in other relevant sections.

In conclusion, there are two other aspects which also need to be discussed briefly within this context. Firstly, Ginsberg and the Beats' involvement with the American countercultural movement of the 1950s is obviously related to the counterhegemonic slant of Beat poetry, focused on dominant **social** perceptions and beliefs based on tacitly accepted metanarratives. Secondly, however, it can also be argued that the dominant **literary** tradition of high modernism and New Criticism is based on these

¹⁰⁰ This aspect has already been discussed as characteristic of surrealism's project of replacing reason with a more intuitive mode of apprehension (section 3.3.2.2.2), and will therefore not be discussed in further detail here. This similarity also further reinforces the already mentioned link between surrealism and early postmodernism.

metanarratives, and that the Beats' reaction against high modernism and New Criticism already embodies a questioning of these metanarratives.

It is at this point that the notion of form becomes particularly important. Whereas the acceptance of metanarratives presupposes something approaching closure, totalization and unity, postmodernist texts display formal characteristics such as discontinuity, interrelatedness, fragmentation, multiplicity, openness and playfulness. Some of these characteristics are, of course, already present in various strains of modernism, but the New Critical idea of the well-made poem seems to have been extremely influential in the creation of the literary expectations of the postwar American literary scene. The Beats' reaction against the twin influence of high modernism and New Criticism is therefore also a formal reaction, as already pointed out (see section 3.2), and their rejection of the metanarratives on which these are based is simultaneously a rejection of what they perceived to be the closed and stifling form thereof. Instead, Beat poetry moves towards the postmodernist qualities of discontinuity and interrelatedness, fragmentation and multiplicity, openness and playfulness. For example, in 'Howl' (CP:126-133), the images presented are discontinuous and fragmented, flashing through various points in geographical as well as emotional-spiritual space in quick succession, but yet linked by some kind of experiential basis. This link is established through the experimental use of the long line, or breath unit, which thus helps to keep discontinuity and continuity suspended in balance.

As should be apparent from the above comments, formal experimentation is closely linked to the questioning of metanarratives. This aspect will therefore be further discussed in the following section.

4.2.2 Experimentalism, improvisation and innovation

In a way, the characteristics of experimentalism, improvisation and innovation result from the above. Russell (1985:240), for example, points out that experimentalism often originates from a desire to find new voices by violating the constraints of the patriarchal, bourgeois, dominant culture's language and modes of expression. This desire is particularly evident in the writing of minority writers, whose desire to find voices for the marginalised has contributed much to the experimental nature of postmodernist writing. Hutcheon (1988:12) concurs with this when she states that

the "marginal" and the "ex-centric" (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity) take on a special significance and role in the postmodernist recognition that culture is not really the homogenous monolith (middle class, male, heterosexual, white and western) as might have been assumed. In undermining this totalising conception and discourse, postmodernism gives a particular role to the innovative attempts of marginalised voices to give expression to the local and the particular.

Various critics link postmodernism to a spirit of innovation, improvisation and experimentation. Russell (1985:236) emphasises the innovative quality of postmodernist art, and further states that improvisation may be the most characteristic postmodern creative strategy (Russell, 1986:257). Both of these aspects stress the importance of personal creativity and the concomitant demystification of the concept of the ordered artistic work. For this reason postmodernist art is often an art of the spontaneous impulse of the present, resisting order and hierarchy (Brooker, 1991:156).¹⁰¹ Hassan (1975:58) also regards experimentalism as a key characteristic of postmodernism, which includes within itself different aspects, like improvisation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, neo-surrealist experimentation, minimalism, extravaganza, simultaneity, fantasy, play, humour, happening and self-reflexiveness. Innovation, experimentation and improvisation thus all become ways of resisting and subverting the power of metanarratives, of rational order and hierarchy.¹⁰²

Ginsberg's Beat poetry develops this postmodernist characteristic in several ways. As far as content is concerned, his poetry is indeed a celebration of marginalised culture. Gilmore (1997:36) makes this clear when he states that

As much as Presley, as much as the Beatles, Bob Dylan or the Sex Pistols, Ginsberg helped set loose something wonderful, risky and unyielding in the psyche and dreams of our times. Perhaps only Martin Luther King Jr.'s brave and costly quest had a more genuinely liberating impact upon the realities of modern history, upon the freeing up of people and voices that much of established society wanted kept in the margins.

¹⁰¹ This aspect will be discussed further in section 4.2.9, which deals with the importance of immediacy in postmodernism.

¹⁰² However, there are also critics, like Eagleton (1988:386) who feel that postmodernist art denotes the end of innovation, referring to the "depthless, styleless, dehistoricized, decathected surfaces of postmodernist culture" which are nothing more than a parody of the originally experimental art of the avant-garde.

Here again his consistent involvement with countercultural groupings becomes extremely important, since much of his poetry (and in particular 'Howl' – CP:126-133) focuses on and eulogises the extreme lifestyle of the postwar American counterculture (see section 2.2.3).

'Howl' (CP:126-133) is essentially an attempt to give expression to the culture of the marginalised in general. More particularly, Ginsberg's poetry is often an attempt to give voice to homosexual experience¹⁰³ – especially severely rejected, repressed, marginalised and condemned in conservative America of the 1950s. The poem 'Many loves' (CP:156-158) is characteristic of this desire to give expression to homosexual love. It carries a dedication from Walt Whitman, himself one of the pioneers of the poetic description of homosexual love and eroticism. The quotation makes the tone of the poem clear: "Resolved to sing no songs henceforth but those of manly attachment". This poem, as well as 'Howl' (CP:126-133) contains some of the first explicit poetic descriptions of homosexual sex in American literature, and both poems are attempts to give voice to the experiences of a marginalised group. On the content level, Beat poetry thus reflects the experimental and innovative nature of postmodernism in its incorporation of experiential material previously scorned by the dominant literary tradition. The ultimate purpose of this is to expose the fallacy of American culture as homogenously middle-class and heterosexual by foregrounding variety and difference.

In order to give expression to this variety and difference, and to make the rejection of the dominant culture's assumptions complete, it is also necessary to break with conventional, oppressive modes of expression. This is the basis for the formal experimentation of Ginsberg's Beat poetry. In particular, his use of the long line or breath unit, is a way of breaking the New Critical convention of the carefully contained poem.¹⁰⁴ This experimental technique is probably the single most

¹⁰³ See also Stevens (1997) for a discussion of Ginsberg's "homoerotic romanticism" within an early postmodernist context.

¹⁰⁴ In a letter to Richard Eberhart, Ginsberg makes the experimental form of his poetry clear. Referring to 'Howl', he states that the "form of the poem is an experiment. Experiment with uses of catalogue, the ellipsis, the long line, the litany, repetition, etc." (quoted in Davis, 1995a). This comment encapsulates the essential characteristics of Ginsberg's formal innovations, but it is really the long line that is the crucial element of his Beat style.

innovative and characteristic aspect of Ginsberg's poetry, and is present in the majority of his important poems, like 'Howl' (CP:126-133), 'A supermarket in California' (CP:136), 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139), 'Afternoon Seattle' (CP:150), 'Many loves' (CP:156-158), 'Ready to roll' (CP:159), 'The names' (CP:176-179), 'American change' (CP:186-187), and many more.

In most of these poems it is as if the expansiveness of the vision cannot be contained within the confines of traditional poetic form, but spills over into a profusion of words and images linked in one breath. Together with the long line, the sheer lavishness of language is another way in which Ginsberg's poetry defies the poetic convention of the time, an aspect which seems to be closely related to Lodge's (1977:229-239) postmodernist characteristic of excess, which Hassan (1975:58) also terms extravagance.

In other poems, the experimentation with form takes place either by making of the whole poem one long sentence, with little or no punctuation, or by chopping the lines up into measured units that are symmetrically spaced. An example of the first approach is found in 'Europe! Europe!' (CP:171-173):

World world world
 I sit in my room
 imagine the future
 sunlight falls on Paris
 I am alone there is no
 one whose love is perfect
 man has been mad man's
 love is not perfect I
 have not wept enough
 my breast will be heavy
 till death the cities
 are specters of cranks
 of war the cities are
 work & brick & iron &
 smoke of the furnace of
 selfhood makes tearless
 eyes red in London but
 no eye meets the sun (L 1-18)

The second approach is exemplified in 'Sakyamuni coming out from the mountain' (CP:90-91):

He drags his bare feet
 out of a cave
 under a tree,
 eyebrows
 grown long with weeping
 and hooknosed woe,
 in ragged soft robes
 wearing a fine beard,
 unhappy hands
 clasped to his naked breast –
 humility is beatness
 humility is beatness – (L 1-12)

There are many other poems which experiment with this kind of chopped-up lines and spacing, like 'The green automobile' (CP:83-87), and 'Havana 1953' (CP:92-94). Other poems, like 'Siesta in Xbalba' (CP:97-110) 'Sather Gate Illumination' (CP:142-145) and 'Laughing gas' (CP:189-199), make use of a mixture of the above techniques, alternating between long lines, continuous lines and broken lines. In other cases, the experimentation becomes even more extreme, resulting in poems approaching the style of concrete poetry. Compare for example the poem 'Funny death' (CP:200):

FFFF	U		U	NN	N		
F	U		U	N	N	N	
FFFF	U		U	N	N	N	
F	U		U	N	N	N	NY
F		U	U	N		NN	
F		UU		N		N	

The music of the spheres – that ends in Silence
 The Void is a grand piano

 a million melodies
 one after another
 silence in between
 rather an interruption
 of the silence

Tho the music's beautiful

Bong Bong Bon -----
 gnob
 gnob
 gno -----

Bong Bong Bong
 o n
 n o
 g b
 b g
 o n
 n o
 obgnobgnobgnob

The circle of forms
 Shrinks
 and disappears
 back into the piano.

There are many other aspects of Ginsberg's poetry which are developments and elaborations of innovative trends, such as his use of contemporary informal language and his use of specifically American speech rhythms. Both these aspects have already been discussed (see sections 3.2 and 3.3.1.2). It thus becomes apparent that Ginsberg's poetry follows the postmodernist trend of innovation and experimentation, a trend which is already strongly present in modernism, but is pushed to the extreme in postmodernism, particularly as a way of resisting oppressive cultural traditions.

Much of the experimental verve of Ginsberg's poetry comes from his dictum of "first thought, best thought" which is a way of capturing the "[s]pontaneous insight – the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind" (CP:xx). This corresponds closely to the improvisatory and spontaneous nature of some strains of postmodernist writing, which resists hierarchisation by making the spontaneous and immediate impulse the basis of creative writing (see also section 4.2.9). Thus the concept of the ordered artistic work, so emphasised by the New Critics, is demystified. Simultaneously, personal creativity is regarded as primary, above literary convention – again a way of resisting the oppression of dominant cultural traditions. Ginsberg's Beat poetry obviously shares the (early) postmodernist valuation of spontaneity and personal creativity, together with a resistance against

the constraints of dominant cultural traditions – all of which find their expression in an innovative and experimental style.

In conclusion, it would perhaps be worthwhile to compare Ginsberg's definitive Beat poetry with some of his earlier poetry, which gives an indication of just how experimental and innovative his work became. Compare for example the first stanza of 'On reading William Blake's 'The sick rose'' (CP:6), written in 1948:

Rose of spirit, rose of light,
Flower whereof all will tell,
Is this black vision of my sight
The fashion of a pridefull spell,
Mystic charm or magic bright,
O Judgement of fire and of fright? (L 1-6)

The highly traditional poetic diction, set rhythm, rhyme, contained form and conventional material of a poem like this contrast very strongly with the expansive, free forms of later poems like 'Howl' (CP:126-133), and makes one aware of just how great the divide between Ginsberg's Beat poetry and the kind of poetry admired by the mainstream American literary establishment was.¹⁰⁵

4.2.3 The blurring of boundaries

To make living itself an art, that is the goal. – *Henry Miller* –

Another way in which the imposition of order and hierarchy is resisted is through the blurring or destroying of distinctions between established cultural hierarchies or domains (Wheale, 1995:34). Hutcheon (1988:8) links this to postmodernism's resistance to any kind of totalising discourse which leads it to instead explore and challenge limits: the limits of subjectivity, of sexual identity, of systematization, and so forth. For example, postmodernist texts often involve a mingling of genres, previously approached as separate entities (Brooker, 1991:156), or an explicit interaction between various texts, in the form of intertextual play, parody, and

¹⁰⁵ For this reason it is not surprising that many of Ginsberg's early contemporary critics like Hollander, (1984 [1957]:27) regarded this early carefully constructed imitation-metaphysical style as superior to his later work, exemplified in *Howl and other poems* (1956).

pastiche (Hassan, 1993:20). Postmodernism further challenges such distinctions as that between art and life or fiction and nonfiction (Hutcheon, 1988:9).

Another hierarchy particularly targeted by postmodernists is the distinction between high art and mass, popular or consumer culture (Wheale, 1995:34). Postmodernist texts often involve a commingling of fragments of high art and popular culture, to the extent that the assumed dominance of the former is undermined. This also explains why postmodernism has a particular affinity with pop, schlock,¹⁰⁶ kitsch,¹⁰⁷ camp,¹⁰⁸ and slapstick, often linked with parody, pastiche and travesty (Hassan, 1987:20). The postmodernist quality of eclecticism is also particularly relevant here, since it involves the conscious assimilation of styles and themes, often opposed or apparently irreconcilable. Already present in the modernist collage, eclecticism is taken to the extreme in postmodernism, which uses it to challenge and offend the established idea of a regulated system of cultural hierarchies (Wheale, 1995:43). All of the above aspects give rise to what Hassan (1987:20) and Wheale (1995:44) call the tendency of hybridisation in postmodern art.

One of the most important ways in which postmodernist texts blur distinctions is by the intermingling of genres previously regarded as separate entities. In Ginsberg's Beat poetry this tendency is manifested particularly in the use of the long line and/or free verse together with an often almost conversational style, through which the traditional distinction between poetry and prose is undermined. The opening lines of 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139) clearly illustrate this point:

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 hills and
cry.

¹⁰⁶ *Schlock* is a yiddish word for cheap, shoddy or defective goods, and is usually applied to decorative trivia and meaningless, depthless sentimental things (Wheale, 1995:48).

¹⁰⁷ Wheale (1995:48) defines *kitsch* as rubbish with attitude or bad taste with pretensions. It is a mechanical, mass-produced kind of art which operates by formulas and relies on vicarious experience and faked sensations.

¹⁰⁸ Theorists of *camp* behaviour define it as the culture and taste of marginal groups who celebrate the fact of their marginality through parody and self-mockery. Typical instances of this would be drag parades (Wheale, 1995:49).

Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty 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 and machinery.

The oily water in 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 riverbank, 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— (L 1-4)

In other cases, the prose/poetry distinction becomes hazy due to the imagist, notational, prose-style of the poems. 'The bricklayer's lunch hour' (CP:4) and 'The trembling of the veil' (CP:14) are extreme examples of this kind of approach. Compare the following quotation from the first of the mentioned poems:

Two bricklayers are setting the walls
of a cellar in a new dug out patch
of dirt behind an old house of wood
with brown gables grown over with ivy
on a shady street in Denver. It is noon
and one of them wanders off. The young
subordinate bricklayer sits idly for
a few minutes after eating a sandwich
and throwing away the paper bag ... (L 1-9)

The above is an extreme example of the technique, but this highly visual, conversational, notational, and almost factual style is present (in various forms) in much of Ginsberg's poetry – compare 'A typical affair' (CP:63), '345 W. 15th St.' (CP:73-74), 'Havana 1953' (CP:92-94), 'A strange new cottage in Berkeley' (CP:135), 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139), 'Afternoon Seattle' (CP:150) and many more – and contributes to the blurring of the distinction between prose and poetry.

Another important distinction which is undermined by postmodernism is the distinction between art and life or fictional and real, a distinction basic to the traditional mimetic approach to art. For postmodernists this distinction becomes highly problematised, and something of this tendency is also apparent in Ginsberg's poetry, though not in such an extreme form as in some strains of postmodernism. In his case the distinction between art and life is problematised by the highly and overtly personal nature of his art, together with the typically avant-garde idea that art can be a shaping force in the personal and social life (see section 2.4.6.7). This

causes the distinction between art and life to become increasingly blurred, so that life becomes art, and art life.

Sometimes this takes the form of poems where the personal life of the poet – and his friends – becomes the very explicit thematic material of the poem. What basically happens is that in Ginsberg's poetry the distance between the poet/author and the speaking voice of the poem is very small, to the extent that they are indistinguishable – with the poet's very deliberate intention (see section 2.2.4.2). In this category one finds poems describing intense personal emotions. Compare, for example, 'I feel as if I am at a dead end' (CP:71), 'My Alba' (CP:89), 'My sad self' (CP:201-202) and 'Malest cornifici tuo Catullo' (CP:123). There are also poems in which the subjectivity of the perceiving perspective is explicitly and undeniably personal and linked to the poet, such as in 'Over Kansas' (CP:116-119), 'A strange new cottage in Berkeley' (CP:135) and 'Transcription of organ music' (CP:140-141). In other cases documented personal spiritual experiences, visions, hallucinations or dreams form the material of the poem, as in 'Dream record: June 8, 1955' (CP:124), 'The lion for real' (CP:174-175), 'Laughing gas' (CP:189-199) and many more. Personal sexual experiences also often find their way into Ginsberg's poetry, as in 'Many loves' (CP:156-158).

Another way in which life intrudes upon art in Ginsberg's Beat poetry is through the frequent inclusion of fragments of Ginsberg's friends or family's lives, as in 'In memoriam: William Cannastra, 1922-1950' (CP:57-58), 'Gregory Corso's story' (CP:67), 'Wild orphan' (CP:78-79), 'The names' (CP:176-179) and 'To aunt Rose' (CP:184-185).

However, in these poems the blurring of the distinction between art and life only works in one direction, where life intrudes upon art. In many of Ginsberg's strongest poems the intrusion works both ways. In 'Howl' (CP:126-133) the domain of life intrudes on the domain of art through the inclusion of experiences that are either Ginsberg's personally, or those of his "fellow travellers, the crazy, lonely members of his community of misunderstood poet artists, unpublished novelists, psychotics, radicals, pranksters, sexual deviants and junkies" (Asher, 1997b). Obvious examples may be found in the references to the actual experiences of Carl Solomon (L 93-111), Ginsberg's expulsion from Columbia University for writing "obscenities" on the dusty windows of his dormitory room (L 7), Burroughs' retreat to Mexico (L 29) and

Neal Cassady's free-spirited crosscountry driving sprees, involving theft, drugs and promiscuous sex (L 43, 59-60). However, the poem is not only an example of life intruding upon art, but also of art making its effects felt on life. In a limited sense, the poem depicts the attempts of people to make living itself an art, to make art as essential a part of living as breathing, so that creativity and art become crucial conditions of living. The following lines make the indispensable condition of art and creativity as part of living clear (my emphases):

who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving
genitals and manuscripts, (L 35)

who **created great suicidal dramas** on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson
under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be
crowned with laurel in oblivion, (L 46)

who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and **rose up to build
harpisichords in their lofts**, (L 48)

who **scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations** which in the
yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish, (L 57)

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,

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

the madman bum and angel Beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what
might be left to say in time come after death,

and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of **jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the
band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an
eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry** that shivered the cities
down to the last radio

with the **absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies**
good to eat a thousand years. (L 73-77)

In all cases, creativity (primarily represented through writing and music) is regarded as an essential and powerful life-giving force, on both emotional and spiritual terms.

Thus art becomes an essential condition for and constituent of meaningful life, and the domains of art and life can no longer be regarded as separate. Life becomes a poem, and the poem becomes life.

The effects of art on life also have a wider dimension in this poem, and in much of Ginsberg's other poetry. 'Howl' (CP:126-133) uses the real-life experiences of people to construct a picture of the debilitating nature of contemporary materialist and technologised society, and a plea for a return to a more humane, emotional, sensitive, intense and spiritual way of life. This plea is based on the assumption that art may intrude on the domain of real life, and effect some kind of change in this domain. Against the destructiveness of Moloch, the poem pits "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection" (L 3), "shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind" (L 12), "the lamb stew of the imagination" (L 47), and "the archangel of the soul" (L 73). In this way the poem itself becomes an example of how art may intrude upon life, particularly if one takes into account the enormous effect that 'Howl' (CP:126-133) had not only on the youth consciousness of the time, but also on the relaxation of censorship laws in America (see for example Berman, 1980:284 and Smith, 1996).

This notion that art may change life, and that life may and must become art, is central to the avant-garde aesthetics of the Beats, and is also one of the ways in which Beat poetry approaches postmodernism's diffusion of boundaries. However, it needs to be said that postmodernism's emphasis on the diffusion of boundaries between life and art is more textual, in the sense that it places a greater emphasis on the **textual** nature of both domains, which causes them to interweave and be mutually dependent. This characteristic is largely absent in Ginsberg's poetry, but his poetry does, in some ways, approximate the postmodernist diffusion of boundaries between entities previously regarded as separate, particularly in terms of the boundaries between genres, and between art and life. In this way the resistance to hierarchisation and categorisation is effected.

Another important target of postmodernism is the distinction between so-called high art and popular, mass or consumer culture. Since this characteristic remains one of the crucial distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, it will be discussed separately in the following section.

4.2.4 The influence of mass culture

The integration of mass culture in the arts is one of the main factors distinguishing modernism from postmodernism (Jameson, 1991:2). While various critics and groups such as F. R. Leavis and the New Critics have viewed twentieth-century common culture as a threat to refined and enlightened minds, and regarded literary discrimination as a means of sustaining intelligent thought against the mediocrity of mass culture (Wheale, 1995:36), one of the main projects of postmodernism has been to undo this dichotomy between works designed for popular consumption and so-called high art, often by combining the two (Calinescu, 1987a:285; Brooker, 1991:154 and Huyssen, 1986:194, 197). In a wide sense, many postmodernist works aim to be both popular and of recognised artistic quality – compare the immense popular success of postmodernist novels such as John Fowles' *The French lieutenant's woman* (1969), Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose* (1983) and Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's world* (1991). More particularly, this process often involves the structural and thematic intermingling of elements from popular culture – films, music, television, literature – in the art work.

Again, the influence of kitsch and camp, of popular music and mass consumption literary forms like the romance, the Western, the detective story and science fiction becomes extremely important (Calinescu, 1987:312; Hutcheon, 1988:2; Fiedler, 1992:37 and Huyssen, 1986:194). As Jameson (1991:2-3) memorably puts it, postmodernism is fascinated by

the whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the Gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote' as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance.

While some regard the above as a positive development, freeing art from the prison house of high culture and re-connecting it to the wider social context, others regard the influence of popular culture in primarily negative terms as the reduction and commodification of art to merely another element of consumer capitalism (Brooker, 1991:154). This position is taken by Fredric Jameson (1991:4), who believes that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally", leading on to a certain superficiality and depthlessness in postmodernist

art, exemplified by the pastiche¹⁰⁹. Similarly, Eagleton (1988:385-387) believes that postmodernism's dissolution of the boundary between high and popular art creates an art which is deeply implicated in commodification, and is dehistoricized, depthless and essentially empty. Thus the influence of mass culture is seen by some as the imminent collapse of all values and culture (Calinescu, 1987b:7).¹¹⁰ However, a critic like Hutcheon (1988:20) responds more sensitively to the implications of the breakdown of boundaries between high and popular culture when she states that postmodernist artists "parodically use and abuse the conventions of both popular and élite culture, and do so in such a way that they can actually **use** the invasive culture industry to challenge its own commodification processes from within".

Ginsberg's Beat poetry definitely participates in the postmodernist project of removing art from the prison-house of high culture and re-connecting it to the collective and public mass culture. The whole Beat ethos of the 1950s and 1960s aimed to bring poetry back to the people, to de-academise it and re-connect it, as performative art, to the community. Beat poetry played an immense role in the development of the American countercultural movement during the 1950s, for the precise reason that it was essentially populist, created to draw and involve listeners/readers. And indeed, Beat poetry did become widely and popularly disseminated (see section 2.2.1). Initially, of course, institutionalised academics denied the artistic quality of Beat poetry, but with time, it has recognised the immense role that Beat poetry played in reintegrating poetry as an art with the wider cultural community.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Jameson (1991:17) states that pastiche is, "like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody ..." While Jameson (1991) and Eagleton (1988) regard parody and pastiche in primarily negative terms, linking it with depthlessness and stylelessness, Hutcheon (1988:26) believes that parody is not merely ridiculing imitation, but rather repetition with critical distance that allows the "ironic signalling of difference at the heart of similarity", thus creating a critical space for re-evaluating preconceptions.

¹¹⁰ For an early example of such a negative viewpoint, see Irving Howe's 1959 discussion of mass society and postmodern fiction (in Waugh, 1992). This contrasts strongly with the viewpoint of Leslie Fiedler (1992 [1972]), who sees in postmodernism's appropriation of popular contemporary mythologies exciting possibilities.

¹¹¹ This recognition is expressed in Ginsberg's increasing inclusion and representation in the canon of American literature, as well as in his being honoured by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and

This tendency is also obvious in Ginsberg's collaborations with many popular artists. He has appeared with a variety of these artists, of which his collaboration with Bob Dylan has probably been the most extensive.¹¹² In 1971 Ginsberg and Dylan produced an improvisational album together, and Ginsberg took part in Dylan's *Rolling Thunder* tour in the 1970s (Chowka, 1976b). Ginsberg appeared in bit parts in Dylan music videos, like the 'Subterranean homesick blues' video, as well as in movies by Dylan, like the 1977 *Renaldo and Clara* (Asher, 1997a). Other popular artists with whom Ginsberg has collaborated include punk group The Clash (in 1981), Elvin Jones (John Coltrane Quartet drummer), Stephen Taylor, The Gluons and Harry Smith (Willner, 1995). He has also performed with Lenny Kaye (guitarist with Fatti Smith), Lee Ranaldo (from Sonic Youth), Kim Deal (formerly from the indie cult band Pixies), and U2 (Smith, 1996 and Burroughs *et al.*, 1997:42).¹¹³

This populist, open and accessible aesthetic of Beat poetry is reflected in its informal diction, its speech rhythms, its performative nature, its simultaneous personal and social consciousness, its explicit connections to everyday, contemporary life, and its heady mix of criticism, humour and idealism. Most of Ginsberg's poems possess these qualities (some of which have already been discussed), but 'America' (CP:146-148) is particularly exemplary:

receiving numerous other awards (see Tyaransen, 1995). Many early critics of *Howl and other poems*, like Hollander (1984 [1957]) and Rumaker (1984 [1957]), have also revised their opinions of Ginsberg's influence on American poetry. In Hyde's (1984) collection of criticism, these critics asked for addendums to be printed with their original reviews, indicating the enormous shift in the academic response to Ginsberg's poetry. Rumaker's (1984 [1957]:40) apologetic addendum is typical: "Howl' literally moved a generation, unblocking energy in wavy rhythm rippling direct from Whitman. It's easier to recognize that now, 1983, than when this strange, yowling beast first came lumbering up out of the bowels of subterranean America I, like so many others, couldn't admit or recognize it ..."

¹¹² The affection and admiration between the two artists are mutual. In 1986 Bob Dylan stated that "Ginsberg is both tragic and dynamic, a lyrical genius, con man extraordinaire, and probably the greatest influence on American poetical voice since Whitman" (quoted in Willner, 1995). In turn, in an interview with Chowka (1976b), Ginsberg describes Dylan as "a great poet". This interview also provides an extensive discussion of the two artists' collaborations and mutual influences.

¹¹³ The tributes collected in the *Rolling Stone* magazine of May 29, 1997 give a clear indication of the enormous influence that Ginsberg's poetry and his public performances has had on the popular consciousness, from the 1950s right through to the 1990s. The tributes are from a wide variety of popular artists, musicians, novelists, painters and actors, all of whom point out the immense role that Ginsberg has had on the popular consciousness of his time.

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 won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
 (...)
 I'm sick of your insane demands.
 When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks? (L 1-15)

A poem such as this is in keeping with the populist tendency of Beat poetry, which aims to reconnect poetry with social life and make poetry as performance a tangible part of the social life – as is apparent from the many poetry readings and performances in which Ginsberg has participated over the years.¹¹⁴

Apart from the fact that Beat poetry is essentially popular poetry, its connections to popular culture are multifarious. The Beats and their poetry have always had a fascination with popular culture. References to elements from popular culture are numerous, in some cases in the spirit of positive celebration, in other cases with the aim of criticising the mindlessness and apathy of popular culture. An early poem, 'The blue angel' (CP:54) centres on the figure of Marlene Dietrich, describing her as

...a life-sized toy,
 the doll of eternity;
 her hair is shaped like an abstract hat
 made out of white steel.

Her face is powdered, whitewashed and
 immobile like a robot.
 Jutting out of her temple, by an eye,
 is a little white key, (L 5-12)

In this poem, an icon from popular culture becomes the symbol of "mechanical love" (L 2) – a largely negative reflection on the commodification of emotion by popular

¹¹⁴ Asher (1997a) gives a list of some of the important activist events that Ginsberg has participated in in one way or another (particularly during the 1960s and 1970s).

culture. In the later important poem, 'America' (CP:146-148) the references to popular culture are similarly negative:

Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?
 I'm obsessed by Time Magazine.
 I read it every week.
 Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore.
 I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.
 It's always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious. Movie producers
 are serious. Everybody's serious but me. (L 39-44)

The idea that popular culture reduces the depth of emotional experience to superficiality is thus also reflected in this poem.

However, other references to iconic popular figures are more positive. In 'POEM rocket' (CP:163-164) the poet refers to the figure of Albert Einstein:

O Einstein I should have sent you my flaming mss.
 O Einstein I should have pilgrimaged to your white hair! (L 15-16)

The same positive reference to Einstein is found in L 23 of 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170), coupled with a reference to "immortal" Charlie Chaplin who was "driven from our shores with the rose in his teeth" (L 25). In 'Ignu' (CP:203-205) Harpo Marx is classified together with (among others) Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, William Carlos Williams and William S. Burroughs in the category of ignu – "angel in comical form" (L 5). These popular iconic figures are representations of the imaginative and sensitive individual as opposed to the sick, decaying and lifeless contemporary mass culture, often characterised by deceit, greed and political doubletalk. This largely negative evaluation of popular or consumer culture becomes clear in 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170):

Hollywood will rot on the windmills of Eternity
 Hollywood whose movies stick in the throat of God
 Yes Hollywood will get what it deserves
 Time
 Seepage of nerve-gas over the radio (L 50-54)

However, considering the Beats' own populist impulse, it would seem as if it is not the notion of popular culture as such that is despised, but rather what contemporary American society has made of popular culture. All in all, the Beats seem to argue for a popular, widely dispersed culture that embraces such positive spiritual values as honesty, spirituality, love and sensitivity.

Apart from positive and negative associations with popular culture, there are often poems in which there is no real value judgement attached to elements from popular culture, where the popular consciousness merely intermingles with the personal consciousness. Such a poem is 'Laughing gas' (CP:189-199), where the Loony Tunes and Woody Woodpecker make an appearance (L 37), Santa Clauses (L 45) mingle with Christs and Buddhas (L 42) while Mickey Mouse cartoons assume apocalyptic implications (L 67-69). There are clichéd fragments of popular texts: "It was a dark and gloomy night ..." (L 76) and "You take the high road/and I'll take the low" (L 79-80), while the Cheshire Cat (L 180) appears together with Frank Sinatra (L 20-209) and President Eisenhower (L 225). All of these references mingle with more general references to the contemporary social environment: dentists' drills (L 5, 98), jazz (L 10), police cars (L 56, 97), bankrobbers at the Twentieth Century Bank (L 62-63), concentration camps (L 100), jukeboxes (L 138), atomic explosions (L 224), and dead television sets (L 261). All of these references contribute to integrate an awareness of the socio-political environment with the personal consciousness.

Together with this, one also finds the mixture of popular culture and so-called high culture. This assimilation is clearly illustrated in 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170), where icons from popular culture mingle with famous canonical authors, within the context of the contemporary socio-political reality, as is apparent from the following extracts:

Franco has murdered Lorca the fairy son of Whitman
just as Mayakovsky committed suicide to avoid Russia
Hart Crane distinguished Platonist committed suicide to cave in the wrong America
just as millions of tons of human wheat were burned in secret caverns under the
White House
while India starved and screamed and ate mad dogs full of rain
and mountains of eggs were reduced to white powder in the halls of Congress
no godfearing man will walk there again because of the stink of the rotten eggs of
America (6-12)

Puerto Ricans crowded for massacre on 114th St. for the sake of an imitation
 Chinese-Moderne refrigerator
 Elephants of mercy murdered for the sake of an Elizabethan birdcage
 millions of agitated fanatics in the bughouse for the sake of the screaming soprano of
 industry
 Money-chant of soapers – toothpaste apes in television sets – deodorizers on
 hypnotic chairs –
 petroleum mongers in Texas – jet plane streaks among the clouds –
 sky writers liars in the face of Divinity – fanged butchers of hats and shoes, all
 Owners! Owners! Owners! with obsession on property and vanishing
 Selfhood! (L 87-93)

The poem is clearly a mixture of social criticism and personal idealism, aiming to explicitly move poetry into the realm of the social discourse. It aims its criticism at the materialist, selfish and narrow-minded culture of America, personified in figures such as J. Edgar Hoover (L 32) and Theodore Roosevelt (L 79), and places like the White House (L 9) and Wall Street (L 81). Opposed to this he places icons from popular and literary culture alike, such as Charlie Chaplin (L 25), Einstein (L 23) and a variety of artists, including, amongst others, Lorca (L 6), Hart Crane (L 8, 47), Mayakovsky (L 7, 47), Edgar Allan Poe (L 65), Ezra Pound (L 66), Antonin Artaud (L 68) and Walt Whitman (L 6, 78). These figures are iconic representations of the new qualities that the Beat ethos would wish to infuse in American popular culture: humanity, sensitivity, creativity, passion, insight and spirituality.

It thus becomes apparent that the postmodernist characteristic of the fascination with popular culture is adapted in a double-edged way in Ginsberg's poetry to firstly expose the cultural barrenness latent in contemporary popular culture, and secondly to propose an alternative kind of popular culture that espouses qualities based on the Beat ethos. Simultaneously the whole nature of Beat poetry is based on the aim of re-connecting poetry within the wider cultural context, making it part of popular cultural experience while at the same time propagating a new kind of popular culture. In Ginsberg's Beat poetry, then, popular culture is not regarded simply as either negative or positive. What Beat poetry is acutely aware of and exploits is the fact that popular culture has the potential to be both stultifying and liberating, and it is this complex duality that the poetry simultaneously explores and exploits.

4.2.5 The problem of subjective presence and individual identity

Russell (1985:243) states that the "emergence of postmodernism may be most clearly traced in the changing assumptions about the nature and significance of individual identity and autonomy, specifically the value accorded the individual to create new meaning in his or her world and to struggle against social determinism". The nature of individual identity and subjectivity thus becomes a particularly important dimension of postmodern art (Brooker, 1991:156). Firstly, postmodernism moves beyond the notion of a centered, unifying, rational consciousness, or the perceived dominance of the ego (Russell, 1985:253; Hassan, 1975:55 and Hutcheon, 1988:11). As Altieri (1996:772) points out, postmodernism is an attempt at breaking down the ego's armour and overthrowing the "masculine and performing ego" (Altieri, 1996:773). Instead, postmodernism is immersed in the dissolving of fixed identity. This might take the radical form of self-effacement, self-multiplication, self-reflection, loss of self (Hassan, 1987:19), or it might simply involve accepting identity as a transitory locus of consciousness and experience (Russell, 1985:256). One must embrace and live within the flow of events, constantly improvising some sense of self through an assimilation of fragments of self and stimuli from the environment. Or as Altieri (1996:776) states, postmodernism is about "becoming articulate about the conditions within which the process of imagining enriches the possibilities of fully investing in the specific life one is leading".

The reason for this is again to be found in the postmodernist distrust of metanarratives. The idea of the rational, ordering and unifying ego as self is one of the central metanarratives of Enlightenment, and as such is the target of much postmodernist investigation. Another reason for this dispersal of the self is to be found in the nature of postmodern media and culture (Wheale, 1995:52). Hassan (1997:12) points out the influence of contemporary dematerialising technologies such as the telephone, telegraph, television, satellite, and computer, which all contribute to a vast process of derealisation and ephemerilisation – a strange combination of simultaneous subjective presence and absence.

The postmodernist problematics of subjectivity is thus an odd combination of presentness and absence, voice and silence. This results in all kinds of other problems, which also form the basis of postmodernist investigation. For example, "postmodern psychology creates the problem of having to dissolve fixed identity

while preserving a range of values like intimacy that derived from now-outmoded versions of selfhood" (Altieri, 1996:782).

Ginsberg's Beat poetry reflects a rather problematic relationship to this postmodernist characteristic. It has already been pointed out that Beat poetry places a very strong emphasis on the subjective experience and the personal consciousness (see section 2.2.4.2). The question becomes whether Ginsberg's poetry shares in the postmodernist problematisation of self or identity, or whether it accepts the notion of self as it is traditionally understood.

Ginsberg's Beat poetry shows a very strong awareness of the multi-faceted problematic nature of the conceptualisation of the self as fixed point of identity or defined as a rational and ordering ego-consciousness.¹¹⁵ In 'I feel as if I am at a dead end' (CP:71) the speaker talks of never being able to escape "the feeling of being closed in/and the sordidness of self" (L 5-6). In 'POEM Rocket' (CP:163-164) the notion of fixed and substantial identity is also problematised, by dispersing identity into the fragility of words:

Here I am naked without identity
with no more body than the fine black tracery of pen mark on soft paper (L 21-22)

In 'Over Kansas' (CP:116-119) the traditional concept of self as ego is denied, when the poet unequivocally states that "I am no ego" (L 4) a sentiment echoed in L 8 of 'Siesta in Xbalba' (CP:97-110): "let the mind fall down". This belief is also reflected in many of Ginsberg's interviews. For example, in interview with Chowka (1976a and 1976b) he talks of the need to divest the self of ego, the goal of "egolessness" and the fact that there can be no such thing as "essential identity".¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ The interview given in Portugés & Ginsberg (1979) also contains many references to both the importance and the problems surrounding the nature of consciousness and identity, particularly in terms of the poetry written from 1948-1955.

¹¹⁶ It needs to be pointed out that this interview deals extensively with the increasing influence of Tibetan Buddhism in Ginsberg's poetry. Of course, this has very definite implications for the whole concern with self and identity. While the influence of Buddhism is very much latent in the Beat phase of Ginsberg's poetry, it becomes increasingly pronounced in later years. For this reason, the move towards the dispossession of the self or ego becomes much more prominent in Ginsberg's later poetry. See also Moore (1997) and Cherniack (1998) for interviews that deal with the influence of Buddhism on perceptions of the self and consciousness in Ginsberg's poetry.

Ginsberg, 1979:402), by which he not only tried to understand what was happening, but also wanted to transmit this sense to others. The ordering, abstracting, metaphysical role of the self in this process is described as follows:

See, as I was sitting there in a sort of state of suspended mind and suspended awe, no, suspended decision, suspended mental activity – then when I said, “Oh, I’m Allen Ginsberg, I’m having this particular visionary experience, isn’t that great? I’m a poet, I’ll be able to use this for the rest of my life,” then all of a sudden “Oh, let me see, what was I having, what is going on!” ... It was very paradoxical and immediately you become self-conscious, immediately you think, your Eye closes down. (Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979:391-392.)

This rationalising and ordering “I” of the earlier poems makes its presence particularly strongly felt in the poems’ formal structure, which is carefully ordered in terms of rhyme, rhythm, spacing, punctuation and so forth.¹¹⁸ The “I” of this poem is thus largely defined and characterised by its will to order and understanding. However, from the above comment it should already be apparent that Ginsberg came to believe that this abstraction and rationalising approach failed to express his vision – as he clearly states in ‘Long live the spiderweb’ (CP:46). Instead, he reached the conclusion “that only presentation of detail – what you **saw** – speaks and transmits to other people the mental quality of visionary realization. You can’t communicate accurately by conglomerating abstractions” (Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979:394).

This leads to the second group of poems where the “I” is defined not primarily in terms of intellectual force, but rather in terms of perceptual faculty. These poems are typically those written under the influence of imagism, where the “I” moves to the background and the perception of the objective world is foregrounded. Nevertheless, the “I” is still necessarily, though covertly, present as the faculty through which the world is perceived. ‘The trembling of the veil’ (CP:14) is typical of this kind of poem:

¹¹⁸ The link between the notion of self and the formal qualities of the poem is particularly important. While the early poems, with their fairly fixed notion of self as ego are characterised by carefully ordered formal structures, there is an increasing move towards improvisation and spontaneity in Ginsberg’s poetry, which links with the increasing move away from the notion of self as fixed and stable ego. Ginsberg has made this link clear in interview with Chowka (1976a), where he makes an explicit link between improvisational poetry and divesting oneself of the ego.

Today out of the window
the trees seemed like live
organisms on the moon.

Each bough extended upward
covered at the north end
with leaves, like a green

hairy protuberance. I saw
the scarlet-and-pink shoot-tips
of budding leaves wave

delicately in the sunlight,
blown by the breeze,
all the arms of the trees
bending and straining downward

at once when the wind
pushed them.

The "I" of the poem does not attempt to order or understand, but is rather defined simply by its associative perception of the things surrounding him. As Ginsberg repeatedly states in his interview with Portugés (Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979), he started to explore ordinary consciousness through simple perception. His first step was "to fix my mind, to root my mind, ground my mind somewhere – in a common place that other people could see" (Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979:405), which then lead to a "becoming conscious, waking up to what was ordinary" (Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979:390).

Other poems where this kind of "I" is present are 'The bricklayer's lunch hour' (CP:4), 'A meaningless institution' (CP:15), 'After all, what else is there to say?' (CP:29), 'A ghost may come' (CP:71) and 'Havana 1953' (CP:92-94).

Closely related to this is a third group of poems, those in which the "I" is predominantly defined by physical and particularly sexual experience. 'The night-apple' (CP:52; my emphasis) explicitly formulates this sense of the self as defined by physical and sexual experience:

Last night I dreamed
of one I loved

for seven long years,
but I saw no face,
only the familiar
presence of the body: (L 1-6)

The “presence of the body” (L 6) thus becomes the only intimation of the presence of the self, because it is what we know “most deeply, and basically” (Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979:392). This idea that the body is really the essential core of the self is expressed in ‘Song’ (CP:111-112), in which the speaker states that all he has always wanted is “to return/to the body/where I was born” (L 69-71).

Other poems which are based on this notion of self as body and physical experience include ‘Love poem on a theme by Whitman’ (CP:115) and ‘Many loves’ (CP:156-158).

In a fourth group of poems the self is primarily defined in terms of qualities such as emotion, spirit, impulse and unconscious desire. This constitutes one of the most important ways in which Ginsberg’s Beat poetry complicates the preconceived notion of self as rational and ordering ego. The emphasis which Beat poetry places on the above qualities has already been discussed in sections 2.2.4.1 to 2.2.4.4, as well as sections 3.3.2.1 and 3.3.2.2, and it thus clearly shares the surrealist impulse to shift the emphasis from the rational and conscious ego to the irrational, the emotional, the spiritual and the unconscious as important qualities which shape the flux of individual consciousness.

This idea is clearly articulated in an early poem, ‘Psalm I’ (CP:18):

These psalms are the workings of the vision haunted mind and not that reason which
 never changes.

I am flesh and blood but my mind is the focus of much lightning.

I change with the weather, with the state of my finances, with the work I do, with my
 company.

But truly none of these is accountable for the majestic flaws of mind which have left
 my brain open to hallucination.

All work has been an imitation of the literary cackle in my head.

The gossip is an eccentric document to be lost in a library and rediscovered when the Dove descends.

This poem might almost function as a kind of credo for much of Ginsberg's Beat poetry, all of which is based on the assumption that the (creative) self is not only essentially mutable, but is also primarily formed by emotion, impulse, hallucination, dream, spirit, desire, and so forth. The self (as much as the poem) is not the product of "that reason which never changes" (L 1), but changes with its surroundings (L 3). Even more significantly, it is formed by visions and hallucinations (L 1, 4) – characteristics which are placed in direct opposition to the ordering and unifying ego. This assumption also lies at the core of the Beats' positive evaluation of madness¹¹⁹, whimsically expressed in 'Bop lyrics' (CP:42-43):

I'm a pot and God's a potter,
 And my head's a piece of putty.
 Ark my darkness,
 Lark my looks,
 I'm so lucky to be nutty. (L 30-34)

Paterson (CP:40-41) is a more serious exploration of this theme, and is based on one of the central assumptions of Beat poetry: to reduce the self to an ego in a materialistic world is to deny and destroy its multitude and complexity. Instead, Ginsberg's Beat poetry reasserts the importance of unbridled emotion, spirituality and desire in the constitution of the self, thus complicating the traditional notion of the self as ordering, rational and unifying ego.

As should be apparent from the above, Ginsberg's poetry is also acutely aware that the notion of self may ultimately be no more than a social construct, only defined by its relationship to other selves within the same social network. In 'Psalm I' (CP:13) the speaker states that "I change with the weather, with the state of my finances, with the work I do, with my company" (L 3). This clearly indicates an awareness that the self is (positively or negatively) shaped by its position within the social environment. Ginsberg's poetry as a whole is very aware of this, since his concerns are always personal as much as social. The many poems in which Ginsberg places

¹¹⁹ The Beats' positive evaluation of madness as a means of resisting social conditioning as well as the domination of the intellect has already been discussed extensively in sections 2.2.4.2 and 3.3.2.2.2.

himself within a variety of social relationships with other significant people are typical of this tendency to view the self in terms of relationship with others. Also, the influence that society has on the creation and definition of selves is similarly very prominent (and predominantly negative), as in 'Howl' (CP:126-133) and 'America' (CP:146-148). This aspect relates more to the following section, and will be discussed in more detail there.

Summarised, then, one may say that in Ginsberg's Beat poetry the self is sensed or approximated in five ways:

- I ≈ ego, reason, order, understanding, unity, fixed point of identity
- I ≈ perception
- I ≈ body
- I ≈ emotion, spirit, impulse, unconscious
- I ≈ social construct

The last four, and especially the third, dominates Ginsberg's poetry, and complicates the traditional notion of the self as a fixed point of identity. Together they form the central tenet of Beat poetry's sense of self: that the self is neither fixed ego nor rational mind, but is made up of many interwoven and constantly changing parts, all of which are crucial to the sense of self. In 'Tonight all is well' (CP:32) the speaker expresses the sudden realisation that the cause of his problems is that "my head/is severed from my body". Beat poetry is an attempt to reconnect all the parts of being to recover a more holistic (though constantly changing) sense of self. This idea forms the basis of 'Fragment 1956' (CP:149), where the speaker implores the reader to find the "naked original skin" (L 3) beneath the "dreams/& robes of thought" (L 3-4). In this way, the "perfect self identity/radiant with lusts and intellectual faces" (L 4-5) may be recovered

breathing and sentient among flowers and buildings
open-eyed, self knowing, trembling with love — (L 8-9)

Ginsberg's Beat poetry, then, shares with postmodernism a questioning and complication of the conventional notion of the self as ordering, unifying and rational ego. Furthermore, Beat poetry, like postmodernism, does not see the self as a final,

fixed and definitive point of identity, but rather as a polymorphous, fluid, inconstant entity.

In postmodernist art this is often reflected in techniques involving self-multiplication and self-reflection, coupled with an awareness that the self can only be apprehended in transitory, ever-changing moments. Ginsberg's Beat poetry, to a certain extent, is also characterised by these techniques. As far as self-multiplication and self-reflection are concerned, the many speaking selves that appear in Ginsberg's poetry are multiplications of himself, and these selves are constantly changing or mutating. All of the poems mentioned in this discussion contain different selves which are reflections of the multiplicity of self as experienced by the poet. For example, the playfully sorrowful self in 'Sweet Levinsky'¹²⁰ (CP:19) is quite different from the "I" in 'Paterson' (CP:40-41), while the childhood "I" and the speaking "I" of 'To Aunt Rose' (CP:184-185) are also two different multiplications of Ginsberg's experience. The tender, emotionally personal "I" of 'Many loves' (CP:156-158) is vastly removed from the half-ironic, self-deprecating yet castigating "I" of 'America' (CP:146-148) or the impassioned, fervent, prophetic "I" of 'Howl' (CP:126-133) and 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170). The selves of '345 W. 15th St.' (CP:73-74), 'Havana 1953' (CP:92), 'A strange new cottage in Berkeley' (CP:135), and 'At Apollinaire's grave' (CP:180-182) are not only vastly removed from each other in terms of time and space, but also in voice and experience. Furthermore, there are many different fantasy or dream selves, as in 'A crazy spiritual' (CP:75-77), 'The green automobile' (CP:83-87), 'Love poem on a theme by Whitman' (CP:115) and 'A supermarket in California' (CP:136).

In an interview with Leuzzi (1997)¹²¹, Ginsberg explains something of this tendency of self-multiplication:

¹²⁰ The name *Levinsky* was one of Ginsberg's nicknames among his early circle of friends (who had a penchant for calling each other by nicknames). The title of the poem seems to come from a postcard written by Kerouac to Ginsberg, which starts with the salutation "Dear Sweet Levinsky" (Kerouac, in Charters, 1996:183). Charters' (1996) edition of Kerouac's letters contains many other examples of the nicknames that the group of friends called each other. See also Watson (1995:113).

¹²¹ This interview is marred by an aggressiveness on both sides, which makes it rather fruitless and superficial, but the quoted comment nevertheless does give some indication of Ginsberg's beliefs about the notion of self.

I'm a Beat poet, I'm a Jew, I'm an academic, I'm a Columbia graduate, I'm a Buddhist, I'm a Russian (since my mother's Russian), and I'm a professor at Brooklyn College. I am also gay/queer/homosexual. I have so many identities. Why should I limit myself to one? ... I have, like all humans, multiple identities, and they are all an important part of me.

Ginsberg's poetry very consciously disperses his sense of self into a multitude of selves in a great variety of poems. Ginsberg's Beat poetry then obviously shares with postmodernism an experimentation with self-reflection and self-multiplication, undermining the notion of the self as a fixed, final and definitive point of identity. This leads to the awareness that the self is a mutable, shifting estimation, and that it needs to be seen in the light of this constant change, as expressed in 'Laughing gas' (CP:189-199):

It's the instant of going
 into or coming out of
 existence that is
 important – to catch on
 to the secret of the magic
 box

Stepping outside the universe
 by means of Nitrous Oxide
 anesthetizing mind-consciousness

 the chiasm was an impersonal dream –
 one of many, being mere dreams.

 the sadness of birth
 and death, the sadness of
 changing from dream to dream,
 the constant farewell
 of forms ...
 saying ungoodbye to what
 didn't exist (L 15-32)

As far as the notion of identity and subjectivity is concerned, Ginsberg's Beat poetry then seems to share in the postmodernist questioning of self-identity as a fixed point primarily defined as ordering and reasoning ego. In doing so, the notion of self is re-connected with emotion, spirituality, physicality and desire (instead of being identified with reason), and is simultaneously qualified by an awareness that the concept of

self is an abstraction from an ever-changing field of personal experience and awareness. This idea had already been expressed, a century earlier, by one of Ginsberg's most important precursors, Walt Whitman, in 'Song of myself' (Whitman, 1996:75):

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself;
I am large I contain multitudes. (Part 51, L 6-8)

What matters then is not the determination of a fixed identity, which is impossible, but rather an awareness of **subjective presence**. Something of the fluid, changeable self is invested in the poem through the presence of voice and the infusion of the personal in the poem. However, it needs to be emphasised that Ginsberg's Beat poetry is not as strongly and explicitly concerned with the issue of subjectivity as some strains of postmodernism, nor does it partake in the radical experimentations or equivocations thereof. Nevertheless, as one of the originating movements of postmodernism, Beat poetry initiates the questioning of assumptions regarding identity and subjectivity.

4.2.6 The individual and society

On the poet devolves the most vital function of society: to recreate it – the collective world – in time of stress, in a new mode, fresh in every part, and so to set the world working or dancing or murdering each other again, as it may be. – *William Carlos Williams* –

Many post-World War II artists and critics came to feel that high modernism had cut itself off from social reality, instead creating and sustaining an art-for-art's-sake dogma of creativity. Postmodernism reacts against this by re-contextualising and historicising art – not in a realist way, but with an awareness of the textually constructed nature of both context and history. Russell (1985:245-246) points out that postmodernism involves

a major re-evaluation of the nature of the individual's relationship to society, and specifically to society's semiotic codes of behavior, value and discourse. The postmodern individual, the writer, and the text now experience and articulate themselves self-consciously from within the social context from which, nevertheless, they may still feel alienated and of which they may still be critical. But postmodern

literature recognizes that all perception, cognition, action, and articulation are shaped, if not determined, by the social domain. There can be no simple opposition to culture, no transcendent perspective or language, no secure singular self-definition, for all find their meaning only within a social framework.

Postmodernism rediscovers and further problematises the relationship between the individual and society, the political and the aesthetic, history and the text, and engagement and art (Huysen, 1986:221). In some of its forms, postmodernism attempts to demystify and deconstruct social values and systems, which might appear to have the authority of essential truth but are actually just ideological fictions limiting individual freedom (Russell, 1985:247). However, postmodernism has no simple solutions to this problem, but is acutely aware that creation has an ambiguous status in a society "which seems alternately to control or prefigure individual expression and yet to allow substantial personal freedom" (Russell, 1985:246). Therefore individuals and texts might speak out against a dominant societal discourse, but the individual always remains inextricably entangled in that same society – there is no escape from the social dimension of existence.

Ginsberg's Beat poetry, while highly personal in nature, is acutely aware of and often aggressively involved with the social context. As stated in the previous section, as well as in the section on popular culture (section 4.2.4), the social context more often than not finds its way into his poetry, and the "I" of his poems self-consciously articulates itself from within the social context.

Ginsberg's poems often define and place the "I" in terms of its relationship to other people, reflecting the realisation that the self exists within a network of relationships to other people. For Ginsberg, the most important of these relationships is the relationship with the lover. In particular, the intensity of his relationship with Neal Cassady pervades many of his poems, such as 'The green automobile' (CP:83-87), 'Many loves' (CP:156-158), 'The names' (CP:176-179) and parts of 'Howl' (CP:126-133). But there are also other lovers, both male and female, as in 'A typical affair' (CP:63), 'An atypical affair' (CP:72), and 'Malest cornifici tuo Catullo' (CP:123). The relationship with friends is just as significant, as becomes apparent in the many poems based on the idea that friendships are crucial to the process by which an individual perceives himself and experiences meaningfulness in life. 'The names' (CP:176-179) is particularly exemplary of this. The poem is essentially a litany,

directed to several of Ginsberg's friends that seem to have had a crucial influence on his life, including Herbert Huncke, Phil Black, Leroi Jones, Joan Burroughs, Bill King and Neal Cassady. The same thing happens in many other poems, like 'Howl' (CP:126-133), 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139), 'Fragment 1956' (CP:149), 'Scribble' (CP:152), 'At Apollinaire's grave' (CP:180-182), 'To Lindsay' (CP:183) and many more. Similarly, Ginsberg also often places himself within the context of family relationships as in 'America' (CP:146-148) and 'To Aunt Rose' (CP:184-185). The effect of this is to place the poem within an explicitly personal-social context, thus unabashedly connecting it to the biography and social context of the poet, instead of striving for some kind of timeless universality closed within the poem.

However, there is a more important dimension in which Ginsberg re-connects the personal and the social. Much of Ginsberg's poetry is concerned with the nature and quality of the societies in which we live. In particular, his focus is upon the American context of the 1950s. Both 'Paterson' (CP:40-41) and 'Howl' (CP:126-133) are, as has been pointed out, attacks on the lovelessness, materialism, conservatism and insipidity of contemporary American society, simultaneously showing the effect that this kind of society can have on the individual. Ginsberg is placed within this society, from where he directs his criticism at what he perceives as society's shortcomings. This relates more to the following section on activism and anarchism, and will be discussed in further detail there.

It should be apparent that Ginsberg's poetry often takes the form of social commentary and criticism, looking at society from the underside. Therefore images of society pervade his poetry, through which he depicts different social environments and their characteristics. The negative evaluation of American society, for example, is expressed in many poems like 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170) and 'Howl' (CP:126-133), both of which have already been discussed extensively. 'My Alba' (CP:89) is a simpler poem that expresses much the same idea, though focusing less on the details of the social environment and more on the agony that it inflicts on the individual:

Now that I've wasted
 five years in Manhattan
 life decaying
 talent a blank

talking disconnected
 patient and mental
 sliderule and number
 machine on a desk

autographed triplicate
 synopsis and taxes
 obedient prompt
 poorly paid

stayed on the market
 youth of my twenties
 fainted in offices
 wept on typewriters

deceived multitudes
 in vast conspiracies
 deodorant battleships
 serious business industry

every six weeks whoever
 drank my blood bank
 innocent evil now
 part of my system

five years unhappy labor
 22 to 27 working
 not a dime in the bank
 to show for it anyway

dawn breaks it's only the sun
 the East smokes O my bedroom
 I am damned to Hell what
 alarmclock is ringing

This poem transfers the more generalised rage against corrupt American society, expressed for example in 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170), to a more personal level. The speaker of the poem has participated (though unwillingly) in the expectations of middle-class America, but it has left him with nothing but a decaying life characterised by despair and isolation.

This isolation from society is another important theme in Ginsberg's Beat poetry. 'In the baggage room at Greyhound' (CP:153-154) is a bleak vision of "irritable baggage clerks" (L 4), "millions of weeping relatives" (L 5), "an indian dead with fright talking to a huge cop by the Coke machine" (L 7), a "trembling old lady with a cane taking the last trip of her life" (L 8), a "red-capped cynical porter" (L 9), "Joe at the counter with his nervous breakdown" (L 13), all within "the grayish-green whale's stomach interior loft where we keep the baggage" (L 14). The speaker of the poem is completely isolated, merely "looking around at the horrible dream" (L 10), and becoming aware of the isolation of all those around him. This human isolation is transferred to the image of "hundreds of suitcases full of tragedy rocking back and forth waiting to be opened" (L 15), effectively capturing the sense of painful isolation that is kept hidden and never shared.

Similarly, in 'Havana 1953' (CP:92-94) the speaker is an observer of the situation around him, populated with a variety of people drinking, chatting, singing, eating and dancing, but he never becomes involved in the human interaction, instead remaining in his isolation:

and I alone at a table
 on the pation in the dark
 observing the square, drunk. (L 97-99)

In 'Siesta in Xbalba' (CP:97-110) this isolation, coupled with the almost covetous observation of other people's interaction, becomes almost voyeuristic. After spying on two couples dancing and talking, "pushing each other,/happily, happily,/to a moment of love" (L 454-456), the speaker is left only with the harsh awareness of his loneliness:

What solitude I've
 finally inherited. (L 438-458)

This sense of isolation pervades many of Ginsberg's poems. Short poems like 'Tonight all is well' (CP:32), 'A desolation' (CP:56) and 'Marijuana notation' (CP:66) as much as longer poems like 'Howl' (CP:126-133), '345 W. 15th St.' (CP:73-74) and 'Europe! Europe!' (CP:171-173) are pervaded by this sense of being cut off from society.

The Beat ethos is very much concerned with re-connecting the individual and society as well as the aesthetic and the political – an aim similar to the early postmodernist desire to re-connect art with the social context. Ginsberg's Beat poetry accomplishes this in many ways. Firstly, it inscribes the personal relationships of the poet into many poems, showing the "I" within a context of meaningful human connections, while simultaneously forging an explicit link between the poem as artwork and the actual life and context of the author. Secondly, much of Ginsberg's poetry can be described as social commentary or criticism, with the result that the social context often forms the subject matter of the poems. In other cases, the social context is merely present as background for the more personal concerns, but in all cases there is evidence of an awareness that the individual (and art) is irrevocably part of some kind of social context. However, this social context may have a destructive influence on the individual, or may cause him to become alienated from the larger part of society. This is particularly true of Ginsberg's poetry, which regards contemporary American society as warped by materialism and emotional apathy, destroying the essential human qualities of spirituality, emotion, compassion and sensitivity. The postmodernist concern with the relationship between the individual and society is thus also reflected in Beat poetry, though in a unique form that draws much on the avant-garde view of the relationship between artists, art and society. The avant-garde believes that art can and must intervene in social arrangements which are detrimental to the well-being of the individual (see Russell, 1985:254). This activism characterising the avant-garde is also a characteristic of some strains of postmodernism, and the following section will discuss its relevance to the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg.

4.2.7 Activism and anarchism

Poetry's role is to provide spontaneous individual candor as distinct from manipulations and brainwash. – *Allen Ginsberg* –

no more propaganda for monsters – *Allen Ginsberg* –

The above leads on to a central issue in the postmodernism debate, concerning itself with whether postmodernism is essentially progressive-anarchist-activist or

conservative.¹²² Russell (1985:254) regards postmodernism as essentially anarchist: "If a political vision is implicit in both the social and aesthetic dimensions of postmodernism, it is that of anarchism – the expression of a defensive rage and creative idealism." He further states that postmodernism is an attempt to establish a space of critical distance and freedom, or even activist intention, by disrupting conventions and language (Russell, 1985:251). Liebenberg (1988:283) also sees progressive tendencies in postmodernism, particularly because it aims to liberate from possibly limiting metanarratives and hegemonic constructions of history, and challenges the institution of high culture.

However, there are also those who deny the activist or anarchist possibilities of postmodernism. A critic like Eagleton (1988:385-386), for example, sees no activist possibility in postmodernist art: "Postmodernism, from this perspective, mimes the formal resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant-garde while remorselessly emptying it of its political content." Liebenberg (1988:283) also points out some tendencies within postmodernism which might be seen as conservative. For example, it often brackets reality and thus avoids any attempt to get to terms with it or even change it, thereby freeing one of social and political responsibility.

In response to these kinds of opinions, Hutcheon (1988:16) points out that postmodernism is not an escape from either history or responsibility, but rather an attempt at creating a space where history, culture and society might be rethought as human and textual constructs. In this way the activist potential of postmodernism becomes apparent. However, she also warns against simply categorising postmodernism as necessarily oppositional, because the paradoxical nature of postmodernism and its openness to opposing political appropriations complicates such a simple ideological positioning (Hutcheon, 1988:217).

When faced with opposing viewpoints like these, it is useful to remember that postmodernism is a phenomenon which carries much variation within itself, and is also open to interpretation from various angles. Therefore it is entirely possible to see activism and anarchism in some strains of postmodernism, while others might be fairly conservative. However, if one regards the origins of postmodernism as a return

¹²² See Huyssen (1986:197-206) for an extensive discussion of the debate on whether postmodernism should be seen as progressive or conservative.

to the ideas of the avant-garde, then it becomes easier to link postmodernism with anarchist tendencies. Russell (1985:15) clearly states that for the avant-garde, aesthetic revolution is always linked to social revolution. Art therefore has the potential to change individual and collective perception and behaviour, as well as the structures of social life (Russell, 1985:24). For the avant-garde, art essentially merges with life, and it is this tendency which is taken over in some strains of early postmodernism.

Ginsberg's Beat poetry quite obviously shows correspondence to the early postmodernist activism and anarchism, exemplified in its artistic return to the avant-garde and in its involvement with countercultural movements in postwar America. The anarchic tendency of Ginsberg's Beat poetry is apparent on several levels. Firstly, its deliberate disruption of literary conventions, established by the alliance between high modernism and New Criticism, is anarchic in a typically avant-garde way.¹²³

On a more social level, Ginsberg's Beat poetry displays an anarchic and activist tendency in its often controversial political stance and explicit involvement with social issues. One of the most strongly activist poems written in Ginsberg's Beat phase is 'America' (CP:146-148). In this poem Ginsberg criticises American society on several grounds, using a technique of "one-liners in different voices, sardonic schizophrenic, the tone influenced by Tzara's Dada manifestos" (Ginsberg, 1995). He condemns it for its obsession with technological warfare that destroys human beings (L 4-5, 17), while simultaneously deploring its unwillingness to embrace qualities such as spirituality, naked honesty, vulnerability, compassion, tolerance and humanity:

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?
 I'm sick of your insane demands. (L 8-14)

¹²³ The Beats' anarchic reaction against established literary tradition has already been discussed in section 3.2, and therefore will not be discussed in any further detail here.

Furthermore, he criticises American society for its profound distrust and suspicion of countries like Russia and China, by parodying stereotypical paranoid representations of these countries and their people:

America it's them bad Russians.
 Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians.
 The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad. She wants to take our cars
 from our garages.
 Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red Reader's Digest. Her wants our auto
 plants in Siberia. Him big bureaucracy running our fillingstations.
 That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black niggers. Hah.
 Her make us all work sixteen hours a day. Help. (L 63-67)

This paranoia and intolerance is further coupled with excessive materialism (L 56, 65, 66) and emotional barrenness (L 39).

Ginsberg then (often ironically and humorously) places himself in an oppositional stance. Instead of economic wealth, military power and technologically advanced weaponry, his "national resources" (L 49) consist of

two joints of marijuana millions of genitals and unpublishable private literature that
 jetplanes 1400 miles an hour and twentyfive-thousand mental institutions.
 I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who live in my
 flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns. (L 50-51)

Instead of working seriously, industriously and responsibly to amass wealth (L 44), the poet describes himself as follows:

I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
 I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet.
 When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid. (L 29-31)

The mindless Communist paranoia of American society, together with the unquestioning acceptance of political doctrine is countered with the poet's description of his involvement with Communist politics. In L 28 he states: "America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry", and this is further elaborated upon in L 61-62:

America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the speeches were free everybody was angelic and sentimental about the workers it was all so sincere you have no idea what a good thing the party was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand old man a real mensch Mother Bloor the Silk-strikers' Ewig Weibliche made me cry I once saw the Yiddish orator Israel Amter plain. Everybody must have been a spy.

America you don't really want to go to war.

Finally, instead of the emotional and spiritual superficiality of American society, the poet consistently exhibits a concern for authentic and sincere emotion and spirituality, "mystical visions and cosmic vibrations" (L 36). Together with this, he also calls for a genuine concern for the lot of people, whether they are starving of hunger (L 13), in prisons and mental institutions, or homeless (L 50-51).

The last three lines of the poem contain an explicit (though self-deprecating and ironic) personal commitment to change this society – not by participating in its institutions, but by a personal (most probably poetic) effort:

I'd better get right down to the job.
 It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts factories, I'm
 nearsighted and psychopathic anyway.
 America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel. (L 71-73)

This commitment to exposing the wrongs of society and actively trying to create solutions and initiate changes pervades much of Ginsberg's poetry. 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170) is another example of such a poem, as is 'Howl' (CP:126-133). The underlying assumption of poems such as these is that poetry should make social injustice its business, and moreover, that poetry has the power to exert some kind of influence and initiate some kind of change in society. Ginsberg (in Moore, 1997) states that in the 1940s and 1950s his poetry expressed

some sense of hope that there could be a big enough change to save the planet. There was, at least, a desire for that, a hope that people would strive for some sort of ideal America: democratic, conservationist, sexually open. Equal righteousness for blacks and for Jews, for gays and for women.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ In the same interview (Moore, 1997) Ginsberg's comments convey some sense of disillusionment with this avant-garde belief. He talks of a "karmic hole in the middle of America's brain" and states that

Poetry's power lies in changing perceptions, alerting desensitised people, activating the impetus for change and creating cohesion within a group of people. Therefore Ginsberg's Beat poetry is never an escape from social and political issues, but is built on the belief that poetry can and must be involved in both the personal and the social, since the two are inextricably linked. As Gilmore (1997:36) points out in his tribute to Ginsberg:

Just as Dylan would later change what popular songs could say and do, Ginsberg changed what poetry might accomplish, how it could speak, what it would articulate, and who it would speak to and for. Ginsberg's words – his performances of his words and how he carried their meanings into his life and actions – gave poetry a political and cultural relevance ...

This belief is also apparent in Ginsberg's constant practical and poetic involvement with numerous activist groups, campaigning for human rights, peace, environmental issues or gay issues (see Austin, 1995; Tyaransen, 1995 and Moore, 1997). It also needs to be pointed out that the activist tendency, though already quite apparent in the Beat phase of Ginsberg's poetry, becomes much more explicit in later volumes of poetry published during the 1960s and 1970s, when Ginsberg's involvement with social issues also reached a peak and countercultural movements became more overtly political.

Ginsberg's Beat poetry is obviously activist and anarchist, not only in its rejection of traditional literary values, but also in its questioning of accepted conservative social and political values. This is especially true for those values which neglect humanity and tolerance in favour of blind political dogmatism. All in all, Ginsberg's poetry is progressive and activist in nature, constantly questioning assumptions and exploring even the most extreme alternatives with open-mindedness. It (either implicitly or explicitly) argues for the acceptance of the differences between people (be it in terms of race, political belief, class or sexual orientation) based on love and tolerance instead of fear, prejudice and bigotry. It should then be apparent that Ginsberg's activist intentions do not necessarily propagate **political** values, but are rather

"we're in a deeper hole than we were in the forties and the fifties", out of which "I don't think America can ever climb again". Nevertheless, despite this disillusioned tone, Ginsberg's poetry has never levelled off in terms of its political involvement and activist intentions.

focused on **human** values. A comment by Ginsberg on 'Howl' (quoted in Davis, 1995b) makes this clear. He states that to call 'Howl'

a work of nihilistic rebellion would be to mistake it completely. Its force comes from positive "religious" belief and experience. It offers no "constructive" program in sociological terms – no poem could. It does offer a constructive human value – basically the experience – of the enlightenment of mystical experience – without which no society can long exist.¹²⁵

4.2.8 Delight, play, performance

Our ludic language is not created in order to protect us, to place us in a refuge from the world, but, on the contrary, to place ourselves and this world in question, and consequently to transform it by what you would call the imagination. – *Alain Robbe-Grillet* –

One of the main distinctions between modernism and postmodernism is the latter's inclusion, exploration and affirmative reevaluation of elements of delight, enjoyment, play, chance and performance (Calinescu, 1987a:284; Fiedler, 1992:35 and Russell, 1985:248). Eco (1983a:67) in particular emphasises the return of delight, passion and imaginative exploration in the postmodern arts, which ultimately aims at breaking down any barriers between art and enjoyment. Hassan (1987:21) describes this tendency in postmodernism as carnivalisation (borrowing the term from Bakhtin), and points out that postmodernism riotously embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonisation, irony and hybridisation. The tendency of carnivalisation further also indicates polyphony, "the centrifugal power of language, the 'gay relativity' of things, perspectivism and performance, participation in the wild disorder of life, the immanence of laughter" (Hassan, 1987:21).

In a way, this dimension of postmodernism is a reaction against the sober, serious and largely negative perception of high modernism, so that postmodernism comes to regard itself as "a joyous rebirth of diversity after the austere negativity of modernism" (Calinescu, 1987b:7). In another sense, it has to do with the end of World War II, which,

¹²⁵ The similarity between the early postmodernist characteristic of activism and anarchism is also related to surrealism, which is based on similar avant-garde assumptions. See section 3.3.2.2.3.

with its unprecedented savageness and destruction, with its revelation, could appear as the culmination of a demonic modernity, a modernity that had finally been overcome. Thus, some of the more innovative postwar American poets (the aftermath of the war being less sober on this side of the Atlantic than it was in ruined Europe) freed the postmodern notion from the pessimistic anxieties ... and hailed the new age as an exalted time in which poetic activity could be defined, according to Charles Olson, as a broadly symbolic 'archaeology of morning' (Calinescu, 1987a:267-268).

Lastly, the postmodernist emphasis on enjoyment and play also in a way stems from the demise of grand narratives, since it makes obsolete the heroic and anguished modernist effort to conceive metaphoric or mythic systems which encompass and transcend social reality (Russell, 1985:245).

Here again elements like kitsch, schlock and camp play an important role (Calinescu, 1987a:312), as do parody, pastiche, irony, and allegory (Calinescu, 1987a:285; Wheale, 1995:44-49 and Hassan, 1987:20). Furthermore, it also involves a return to the idea of art as performance and participation: the postmodern text invites performance and wants to be written, spoken, revised, answered, acted out and participated in (Hassan, 1975:55 and Hassan, 1987:21). Hutcheon (1988:77) refers to this dimension of postmodernist art as the emphasis on the enunciative act.

However, the delight, play and performance of postmodernism is not necessarily merely self-serving gratuitous fun. In many cases, postmodernism's ludic spirit creates a freedom which allows "writers to demystify society's codes of meaning and value in order to rip free for their personal use the images and linguistic styles out of which new creations will be made" (Russell, 1985:248). Therefore the pleasure of postmodernist works seems "to come as much from the disruption of the pervasive, distrusted order of reality and interpretation as from the playfulness of gratuitous and undirected creation" (Russell, 1985:257). As Hutcheon (1988:22) consistently points out, postmodernism's use of devices such as parody is not merely a "seemingly introverted formalism", but paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself – to the political and the historical.

This links with the fact that postmodernism is **also** an attempt to come to terms with "the darker, savage, unspeakable side of a modernity that culminated in the genocidal policies of Stalin or Hitler" (Calinescu, 1987a:277). While there are those

who assert that postmodernism is mere superficiality and inauthenticity (see Jameson, 1991:6-9; Eagleton, 1988:386 and Wheale, 1995:53-54), there are also those – like Hassan (1997) and Hutcheon (1988) – who believe that postmodernism is not simply irony, kitsch, ersatz, phoniness and pastiche, but through this moves to an ecological, pluralist and reconstructive postmodernism, which creatively engages with matters such as spirituality, emerging technology, geopolitical realities such as population, pollution, multiculturalism, ecology, humanism, new myths of cosmo-genesis and millennial hopes (Hassan, 1997:16-18).

Ginsberg's Beat poetry certainly re-connects art with enjoyment and often introduces an element of playfulness. Some poems rely on an almost whimsical play with words and sounds, together with sexual innuendo for their playfulness. The two poems 'Fie my fum' (CP:23) and 'Pull my daisy' (CP:24-25) are typical of this. The first was written by Ginsberg in the spring of 1949, while the second is a variation and extension of the first, written in collaboration by Ginsberg, Kerouac and Cassady later the same year.¹²⁶

The last three stanzas of 'Fie my fum' (CP:23) are typical of this kind of associative play with words and sounds, coupled with sexual innuendo:

Whore my door,
 Stone my dream,
 Milk my mind
 And make me cream,

 Say my oops,
 Opt my shell,
 Rol my bones,
 Ring my bell,

 Pope my parts,
 Pop my pot,
 Poke my pap,
 Pit my plum. (L 17-28)

¹²⁶ See Ginsberg (1995) for a recounting of the development of the poem. It is also interesting that the title of the poem became the title for Robert Frank's 1959 movie, tuned by David Amram and sung by Anita Ellis. Yet again, Ginsberg's influence on and integration in the popular becomes apparent.

In the last stanza, alliteration, together with the playful associative metamorphoses of words into each other is particularly important. It accounts for the transformation from *pope* to *pop* to *poke* to *pit*, running parallel with the transformation from *parts* to *pot* to *pap* to *plum*. The changes seem entirely arbitrary, as if selected on the basis of chance association, but still sustain the sexual suggestion. The same processes are at work in the previous stanza, but here it also seems to work diagonally, as well as vertically. In L 21-22 the transformative and alliterative process works diagonally, so that *say* becomes *shell* and *oops* becomes *ope*. In L 23-24, vertical alliteration is again more important with *roll* linking with *ring*, and *bones* with *bell*. The whole stanza (as all the others) is held together by the broken rhyme, where the second and fourth lines of each quatrain rhyme.

'Pull my daisy' (CP:24-25) takes the basic structure of 'Fie my fum' (CP:23) and elaborates upon it, making the sexual connections more explicit:

Say my oops
 ope my shell
 bite my naked nut
 Roll my bones
 ring my bell
 call my worm to sup
 Pope my parts
 pop my pot
 raise my daisy up
 Poke my pap
 pit my plum
 let my gap be shut (L 48-59)

Much the same processes are at work here: a play with sounds and words together with an almost random associative game. This randomness is particularly apparent in poems such as these, but it is important to note that Ginsberg's Beat poetry as a whole, with its aesthetic of spontaneity, leaves a much larger gap for the workings of chance and randomness¹²⁷, than, for example, the carefully crafted and revised works of the New Critical style.

¹²⁷ The influence of chance and randomness in the creative process is made even more explicit in some of Ginsberg's later poetry, created by recording directly onto a tape recorder the physical sensations, sensory perceptions, thought and emotions passing through his mind, together with

Despite the verbal and sexual playfulness of this poem, there is another, spiritual meaning lurking beneath the whimsical surface. Ginsberg (in Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979:401-402) explains it as follows:

Then Kerouac and I collaborated on a really mad ditty, referring still to the subject of "frantic light" – the basic idea was that only by being torn apart, dying or being cracked open or going nuts or making a breakthrough or being turned upside down or inside out or ass by mouth or finally sort of mind suicided, would there be any breakthrough opening ..."

Another poem which follows the same pattern is 'Bop lyrics' (CP:42-43). The rhythmical construction and rhyme, together with the diction and imagery, contribute to give the poem an almost naive quality, which offsets its basically serious content. The first stanza focuses on death:

When I think of death
 I get a goofy feeling;
 Then I catch my breath:
 Zero is appealing.
 Appearances are hazy.
 Smart went crazy,
 Smart went crazy. (L 1-7)

The last three stanzas use the same lighthearted approach, this time dealing with Ginsberg's being committed to an asylum (and his own perception of why he was regarded as mentally unstable):

The time I went to China
 To lead the boy scout troops,
 They sank my ocean liner,
 And all I said was "Oops!"
 *

All the doctors think I'm crazy;
 The truth is really that I'm lazy:
 I made visions to beguile 'em
 Till they put me in th'asylum

background noise, music or conversations (see Ginsberg, 1995). These recordings were then often transcribed unchanged – and sometimes just left untranscribed (see Chowka, 1976a).

*

I'm a pot and God's a potter,
 And my head's a piece of putty.
 Ark my darkness,
 Lark my looks,
 I'm so lucky to be nutty. (L22-34)

As should be apparent, this poem relies strongly on formal construction for its lightheartedness. The same is true for a poem like 'Sweet Levinsky' (CP:19), which has a sing-song, sweetly whimsical quality (created through rhythm, rhyme, repetition and alliteration) which belies the desperation of the content:

Sweet Levinsky, why so tearful,
 sweet Levinsky don't be fearful,
 sweet Levinsky here's your earful
 of the angels chirping cheerful-
 ly Levinsky, sweet Levinsky,
 sweet Levinsky, sweet Levinsky. (L 11-16)

In other poems the lightheartedness is based less on form, and more on the humour, irony, or absurdity of the content. 'The archetype poem' (CP:61-62) and 'A typical affair' (CP:63) both deal with failed relationships in a light-hearted and ironically distanced manner. 'The archetype poem' (CP:61-62) starts of with:

Joe Blow has decided
 he will no longer
 be a fairy.
 He involves himself
 in various snatches
 and then hits
 a nut named Mary. (L 1-7)

However, it doesn't work out and he "picks up his pride/and puts on his pants" (L 42-43), after deciding that she's not "much of a doll/anyway" (L 40-41). The poem ends with the wry commentary:

Why is it that versions
 of this lack
 of communication are
 universal? (L 47-50)

Apart from irony and wit, humour is also sometimes to be found in banality or absurdity, as in 'Four haiku' (CP:137) or 'A supermarket in California' (CP:136). The banality of

Looking over my shoulder
my behind was covered
with cherry blossoms. (L 1-3)

gives a decidedly humorous or light-hearted slant to the haiku. 'A supermarket in California' (CP:136) has a kind of wistful lightheartedness created by the absurd images and mischievous references to Whitman's homosexuality:

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night!
Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! – and you,
García Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the
meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What
price bananas? Are you my Angel? (L 3-5)

Ginsberg's Beat poetry further also shows an awareness of the critical power of humour, irony and parody. This aspect of the lighter slant of Ginsberg's poetry is particularly apparent in 'America' (CP:146-148). The social criticism of this poem has already been discussed at length in the previous section, but it is important to note that the poem uses humour, irony and parody to present its irreverent and incisive critique. From the crude humour of "Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb" (L 5) to the coyness of "When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?" (L 15); from the wry irony of "My ambition is to be President despite the fact that I'm a Catholic" (L 53) to the deliberately shocking parody of "That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black niggers." (L 67), this poem uses all kinds of humorous devices to expose the corruption of American society. This is supported by the overall tone of the poem, which is wry and ironic. However, as the poet points out, "America this is quite serious" (L 68), and even the tongue-in-cheek last line "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" (L 73) carries a very serious commitment.

This mix of serious and playful also becomes apparent in poems in which rapid shifts in tone occur. 'Howl' (CP:126-133), 'Laughing gas' (CP:189-199) and 'The lion for real' (CP:174-175) are all illustrative of this. In the latter poem, Ginsberg describes the response of those whom he tells that there is a lion in his apartment. These responses are described in a very light-hearted manner, as in the following example:

Called up my old Reichian analyst
 who'd kicked me out of therapy for smoking marijuana
 'It's happened' I panted 'There's a Lion in my room'
 'I'm afraid any discussion would have no value' he hung up. (L 5-8)

Contrasting with this tone, which pervades much of the poem, there is a shift to a more serious tone, which indicates the actual seriousness of the experience:

Lion that eats my mind now for a decade knowing only your hunger
 Not the bliss of your satisfaction O roar of the Universe how am I chosen
 In this life I have heard your promise I am ready to die I have served
 Your starved and ancient Presence O Lord I wait in my room at your Mercy. (L 41-44)

It is obvious that Ginsberg's poetry shares the postmodernist exploration of the possibilities of playfulness, chance and delight. It also places a very definite emphasis on performance. Asher (1997b) states unequivocally that Ginsberg's poetry is "one hundred percent performance art". Beat poetry is indeed intended to be read aloud, as Ginsberg's many performances over the years attest (see Moore, 1997 and Asher, 1997a). There are also some poems that are intended as songs (with music included), like 'A Western ballad' (CP:13) and 'Green Valentine blues' (CP:95-96)¹²⁸. In later years, Ginsberg also set many of his poems to music, some of which have been recorded.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ginsberg's (1995) comment on 'Green Valentine blues' clearly links the poem to the characteristic described in this section. He says that the poem "echoes some old Tin Pan Alley, music hall barbershop, almost vaudeville number, sentimental ... the kind of thing you sing to yourself in bed". He also makes another interesting comment on this poem and 'The green automobile' (CP:83-87). He says that he'd "read that in Rome homosexual prostitutes wore green – so green was my gay love color then" (Ginsberg, 1995). This comment makes the homosexual connections of both poems more explicit – but in a very playful, almost coy, manner.

¹²⁹ In 1995 Ginsberg released a four CD box set entitled *Holy Soul Jelly Roll – poems and songs 1949-1993*. The set contains recordings from many performances over the years, retrieved mostly from personal archives. There are recordings as diverse as the original 1956 readings of 'Howl', impromptu

The notions of voice and performance are crucial to the Beat ethos, since both combine with the idea of popularising poetry and making it more accessible. This is the reason why even serious poems display Ginsberg's immense delight in artistic creation and the texture of language, be it in the passionate excess of 'Howl' (CP:126-133), the stark simplicity of 'The bricklayer's lunch hour' (CP:4) or the sweet playfulness of 'Fie my fum' (CP:23). The perennial popularity of Ginsberg's poetry readings and recordings attests to the fact that this delight and passion in poetry have been transmitted to his audience. Whether the goal of his poetry is serious or playful, it is always intended to be enjoyed, and in this sense, Ginsberg's poetry certainly shares in the postmodernist attempt to re-connect art with enjoyment.

4.2.9 Immediacy, intensity and irrationality

Down with causation ... all hierarchies, like dualities, are dead ducks ... I am of the heterogeneous present. – *Charles Olson* –

Today is such a time, when the project of interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.

Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world. The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have. – *Susan Sontag* –

Russell (1985:257) states that the "implicit ideal of postmodernism is a state of pure presentness", and further points out that "in postmodernism there is no strong invocation of an anticipated future, but rather, a preference for immediacy, for the intensity of experience found in the flow of constantly changing present moments" (Russell, 1985:266).

recordings made at parties at John Clellon Holmes' apartment and Neal Cassady's house, recordings of Blake songs, and musical collaborations with many artists. There are also selections from readings previously released on records. The liner notes of this collection are available at <http://www.rhino.com/features/liners/71693lin.html> and also include an extensive bibliography of all other recordings by Ginsberg (see Austin, 1995; Willner, 1995 & Ginsberg, 1995). Nagle (1995) also provides an extensive bibliography of Ginsberg's recordings.

Sontag (1992:55) is another critic who strongly believes that postmodernist art is about experiencing the "luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are". She believes that transparency is the most liberating value in art today, and advocates a recovery of the senses, so to resist the exhausting power of intellectual and rational interpretation.

This points to another important characteristic of much postmodernist writing: resisting categorisation, rationalisation and hierarchisation through an emphasis on the intensity of immediate experience. In poetry, this is partially a resistance against the New Critics' doctrine of the formally well-constructed and intellectually considered poem. Instead, postmodernist poetry presents itself

as testing at every moment its own formal and existential choices simply in terms of the qualities of life that the poetic thinking made available for the poet. Poetry becomes direct habitation, a directly instrumental rather than contemplative use of language. And its test of value becomes the mobility and intensity immediately made available to the poet, so that he or she need not rely on any of the formulated social ideals (Altieri, 1996:775).

Having lost any fixed sense of self or of structure, postmodernist writing (particularly poetry) instead focuses on some immediate situation or flow of mind, playing with impulse, chance, distortion, and multiplicity to evoke the constant movement and fragmentation of perception and experience (Altieri, 1996:777 and Brooker, 1991:161).

Linked to this is early postmodernism's emphasis on the intuitive rather than the analytic. The metanarrative of the superiority of rationality and intellectuality is one of the main targets of postmodernism, which attempts to subvert the dominance of the analytic through an exploration of the intuitive and the spontaneous. As Fiedler (1992:33) puts it, early postmodernism is often "apocalyptic, antirational, blatantly romantic and sentimental ... dedicated to a joyous misogyny and prophetic irresponsibility ... distrustful of self-protective irony and too great self-awareness". It is mantic, magical, and often a little mad, and frequently re-incorporates the ecstasy of dream and vision (Fiedler, 1991:33-46).

Hassan's (1975:56-57) three postmodernist rubrics of primitivism, eroticism and antinomianism also tie in here. The primitivist tendency of postmodernism reacts against intellectualism in its emphasis on energy, psychedelics, madness, animism, magic, Beat, hip and popular music (Hassan, 1975:56). Eroticism involves a return to the body and sexuality (as opposed to the intellect) and incorporates an exploration of a variety of sexualities. Antinomianism is essentially a reaction against Western philosophy, and therefore also often results in a turn to Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, mysticism, transcendentalism, witchcraft and the occult, all of which emphasise immediacy, spirituality and spontaneity, rather than intellectuality and rationality (Hassan, 1975:57).

All of these aspects result in a poetics of indeterminacy or undecidability (Calinescu, 1987a:298), which is in itself a continuation of "one direction within modernism, a direction that challenged the prevailing symbolism of modernist poetics". This relates back to the classification of the two main tendencies in modernism: that of abstractionism and expressionism (see section 2.3.5). In a sense, some of the characteristics of the abstractionist tendency is what came to be institutionalised by high modernism, while the expressionist tendency was largely marginalised in high modernism. It is then fitting that early postmodernism's reaction against high modernism involves a return to that marginalised tradition, which involves movements like surrealism, dadaism and expressionism, which espoused characteristics such as the exploration of different states of consciousness, individuality and spontaneity – rather than analysis, selection and geometrisation.

It is fairly easy to place Ginsberg's Beat poetry within this rubric. The importance that the Beats attached to spontaneity (see section 2.2.4.1) and spirituality (see section 2.2.4.4) clearly connects their writing to this postmodernist characteristic.¹³⁰ Ginsberg (CP:xx) states that his impromptu, often unrevised writing style has always been an attempt to capture the "[s]pontaneous insight – the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind". These assumptions contribute to the immediate and spontaneous quality of his poetry.

¹³⁰ The characteristic of immediacy, intensity and irrationality is also related to sections 3.3.2.2.2, which deals with this quality in surrealist writing, as well as section 4.2.1, which focuses on the distrust of

The content of Ginsberg's Beat poetry is thus an attempt to transmit a sense of the immediate experience, be it physical, emotional or spiritual. The early poems written in the Williams imagist style are clearly attempts to give a reflection of the immediacy of the sensory experience, together with its emotional, intellectual and spiritual connotations. 'The bricklayer's lunch hour' (CP:4) and 'The trembling of the veil' (CP:14) are typical of this kind of objectified transcription of immediate sensation, placing the reader almost directly and palpably in contact with the situation as experienced in particularly its sensory immediacy.

The same is true for poems which attempt to capture the immediacy of sensual or sexual experience, together with its emotional intensity. 'Many loves' (CP:156-158), for example, attempts to capture the intensity and immediacy of the experience in several ways. On a content level it draws the reader into the immediacy through its graphic and carefully detailed sexuality and its honest description of the accompanying emotions. Formally, the poem conveys both the immediacy and intensity of the experience through its use of long lines and repetitive structures which transmit a sense of physical movement, excitement and intensity.

Other poems are reflections of the immediacy and intensity of spiritual-emotional experiences, rather than physical ones. 'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139) is such a poem, as are parts of 'Howl' (CP:126-133). In both cases, the intensity and immediacy are transmitted in the long sinuous lines that follow the flow of both thought and breath, and the ecstatic accumulation of words that suggests an emotional or spiritual overflow. The immediacy and spontaneity of Ginsberg's Beat poetry are also accompanied by a constant energy, intensity, passion and ecstasy, created by form as much as content. This aspect has already been discussed extensively in sections 3.3.2.2.2 and 4.2.1, and will therefore not be discussed in further detail here.

Another manifestation of the characteristic of immediacy, intensity and irrationality in Ginsberg's poetry is the emphasis given to visionary experiences, dreams, madness and spiritual illuminations. This characteristic of Ginsberg's poetry is a combination of the postmodernist qualities which Hassan (1975:57) calls primitivism and

metanarratives. Having already established the importance and prevalence of this characteristic, this section will only focus on aspects that have not been discussed in previous sections.

antinomianism. As already stated, dreams often form the material of poems, as in 'In society' (CP:3), 'A meaningless institution' (CP:15), 'A dream' (CP:44-45), 'The shrouded stranger' (CP:47-48), 'The night-apple' (CP:52), 'The blue angel' (CP:54), 'Dream record: June 8, 1955' (CP:124), and 'Back on Times Square, dreaming of Times Square' (CP:188). This gives some indication of the importance that is attached to dreams

Even more important is the effect of visionary experiences. Ginsberg's 1948 Harlem visionary experiences have been a key influence on his poetry (see Portugés & Ginsberg, 1979). This is further developed by the many other poems that refer to the crucial role of the visionary. In 'Siesta in Xbalba' (CP:97-110) he talks of

wandering solitary in the wild
 – blinking singleminded
 at a bleak idea –
 until exhausted with
 his action and contemplation
 my soul might shatter
 at one primal moment's
 sensation of the vast
 movement of divinity. (L 67-75)

'Sunflower sutra' (CP:138-139) is another poem which describes a visionary experience or illumination, as is 'Sather Gate illumination' (CP:142-145). In the first poem the illumination centres on the contemplation of the sunflower and the resulting realisation that "we're all golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy naked accomplishment-bodies" (L 22). In 'Sather Gate illumination' (CP:142-145) the observation of people on the campus and meditation on love leads the poet-speaker to an epiphany:

Huge Karmas of broken minds in beautiful bodies unable to receive love because not
 knowing the self as lovely –
 Fathers and Teachers!

Seeing in people the visible evidence of inner self thought by their treatment
 of me: who loves himself loves me who love myself. (L 68-70)

The visionary also plays an important role in 'The lion for real' (CP:174-175) and 'Laughing Gas' (CP:189-199). While the former again deals with Ginsberg's

problems of communicating his visionary experiences, the latter is a poem written under the influence of drugs, filled with hallucinations and visions of the universe:

At that moment the whole goofy-spooky of the Universe WHAT?! Joke Being slips into Nothing like the tail of a lizard disappearing into a crack in the Wall with the final receding eyehole ending Loony Tunes accompanied by Woody Woodpecker's hindoo maniac laughter in the skull. Nobody gets hurt. They all disappear. They were never there. Beginningless perfection. (L 37)

The emphasis on the visionary and hallucinatory is the result of the Beat concern with spirituality (see section 2.2.4.4). Most of the Beats rejected conventional institutionalised religions, and searched for alternative forms of spirituality, often found in mysticism, Zen-Buddhism or the occult. In 'America' (CP:146-148) the rejection of institutionalised and formalised religion is epitomised by the speaker's refusal to say the Lord's Prayer (L 35), rather having "mystical visions and cosmic vibrations" (L 36).

'Howl' (CP:126-133) refers to the study of alternative spiritual disciplines, including "Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah" (L 24) as well as Zen (L 20), to which the Beats felt drawn "because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas" (L 24). This same tendency is reflected in references to magic (see 'Ignu' – CP:203-205) and madness (see 'Paterson' – CP:40-41), both of which are seen as states in which the visionary and spiritual dominate.

The importance attached to all of these qualities lies firstly in a reaction against the dominance of order, reason and hierarchy. These qualities are linked to a society which is characterised by utilitarianism, materialism, apathy and superficiality. To overcome the negative and destructive influence of the combination of these two factors, Ginsberg's poetry pleads for a return of intensity, immediacy, wonder, magic, dreams and spirituality, to reactivate these crucial constituents of being to which people have been desensitised. 'Psalm III' (CP:155) expresses this appeal for the infusion of sensitivity, immediacy, intensity and spirituality, and is a clear indication of the crucial role that these qualities play in Ginsberg's poetry:

To God: to illuminate all men. Beginning with Skid Road.
Let Occidental and Washington be transformed into a higher place, the
plaza of eternity.

Illuminate the welders in shipyards with the brilliance of their torches.

Let the crane operator lift up his arm for joy.

Let elevators creak and speak, ascending and descending in awe.

Let the mercy of the flower's direction beckon in the eye.

Let the straight flower bespeak its purpose in straightness – to seek the
light.

Let the crooked flower bespeak its purpose in crookedness – to seek the
light.

Let the crookedness and straightness bespeak the light.

Let Puget Sound be a blast of light.

I feed on your Name like a cockroach on a crumb – this cockroach is holy.

The visionary and spiritual, as well as the intensity of immediate experience are obviously extremely important in Ginsberg's poetry, on both the personal and the social level. This establishes a clear link with the early postmodernist characteristic of immediacy, intensity and irrationality. However, Ginsberg's poetry places a much stronger emphasis on spirituality – an emphasis which is absent in many other developments within postmodernism.

4.2.10 Self-reflexivity

Postmodernism is acutely aware of the medium and nature of its (re)presentation, which leads to a central characteristic of postmodernism: self-reflexivity (Russell, 1985:236, 249). Fokkema (1983:45), for example, points out that postmodernism is very conscious of the inventive power of words; the fact that words and stories are the ways through which we construct our worlds and our selves, as well as justify our existence (see also Russell, 1985:247-248 and Hutcheon, 1988:40). Hassan's (1993:153) concept of immanence also relates to this characteristic, and designates the ability of the mind to generalise itself in symbols, to act upon itself in its own abstractions, and in so doing to become immediately its own environment. Immanence depends on the "emergence of human beings as language animals ... creatures constituting themselves, and determinedly their universe, by symbols of their own making" (Hassan, 1993:153). The role of language as a means of generating texts of worlds and selves becomes extremely important, and is manifested in postmodernist literary works as a self-reflexive concern with the nature of textuality, fictionality and reality as well as the power and limitation of language (Hutcheon, 1988:22).

Ginsberg's Beat poetry, based as it is on spontaneity, subjectivity and immediacy, has an uneasy relationship with this postmodernist characteristic. Even though Ginsberg's poetry is certainly concerned with revitalising the language and form of American poetry, his poems seldom explore metatextual problems in the sometimes highly theoretical and experimental postmodernist fashion. However, there are some poems which are self-reflexive in the sense that they concern themselves with the nature of creation and the possibilities as well as the limits of linguistic and poetic expression.

The majority of the self-reflexive poems focus self-consciously on the act of literary creation. Poems like 'This is about death' (CP:35), 'On Burroughs' work' (CP:114), 'Blessed be the muses' (CP:125) and 'After all, what else is there to say?' (CP:29) all fall into this category. 'After all, what else is there to say?' (CP:29), for example, is essentially an *ars poetica*, stating Ginsberg's poetic belief at the time (early 1949):

When I sit before a paper
 writing my mind turns
 in a kind of feminine
 madness of chatter;
 but to think to see, outside,
 in a tenement the walls
 of the universe itself
 I wait: wait till the sky
 appears as it is,
 wait for a moment when
 the poem itself
 is my way of speaking out, not
 declaiming of celebrating, yet,
 but telling the truth.

This poem is essentially an affirmative poetic vision, but others like 'I attempted to concentrate' (CP:33) and 'Long live the spiderweb' (CP:46) express a sense of futility and frustration which Ginsberg felt to be a risk of the creative project, indicating an awareness of the limitations of language in approximating experience:¹³¹

Seven years' words wasted

¹³¹ See also IPortugés and Ginsberg (1979) for a discussion of how this poem embodies Ginsberg's gradual realisation of the limitations of traditional modes of linguistic and poetic expression.

waiting on the spiderweb:
 seven years' thoughts
 harkening the host,
 seven years' lost
 sentience naming images,
 narrowing down the name
 to nothing,
 seven years':
 fears
 in a web of ancient measure;
 the words dead
 flies, a crop of ghosts,
 seven years':
 the spider is dead.

While the above poem expresses the sense of failure and disappointment in a more general sense, 'The shrouded stranger' (CP:47-48) deals with the perceived failure of this poem itself. In the fourth and last section, titled "Fragmenta Monumenti", the poet writes:

It was going to have a structure, it
 was going to tell a story;
 it was to be a mass of images
 moving on a page, with
 a hollow voice at the center;
 it was to have told of Time
 and Eternity; to have begun
 in the rainfall's hood and moon,
 and ended under the street light
 of the world's bare physical
 appearance; begun among vultures
 in the mountains of Mexico,
 traveled all through America
 and ended in garbage on River Street;
 its first line was to be
 "Be with me Shroud, now –"
 and the last "– naked
 on broken bottles
 between the brick walls,"
 being THE VISION OF
 THE SHROUDED STRANGER OF THE NIGHT. (L 36-56)

Even a cursory glance at the rest of the poem reveals that this description of what the poem was supposed to be like does not fit the actual poem that ended up being written. This poem with its metatextual comment may then be regarded as a reflection on the inexplicable process of creation, which sometimes seems to follow its own direction quite different from the author's intentions. The power of the author to control and direct is thus questioned, a tendency which is apparent in many other postmodernist texts.

Looking at this poem and all the other ones mentioned so far, it should be apparent that most of these were written in the earlier phase of Ginsberg's writing (before *Howl and other poems* was published in 1956). It is striking that there are very few of Ginsberg's longer, more well-known and typical Beat poems which are self-reflexively focused on the nature of poetry as medium. However, there are many of these longer poems which include references to the writing process, or to the writing of the particular poem, to literary issues or to the role of poetry in the world. These poems include 'Hymn' (CP:36), '345W. 15th St.' (CP:73-74), 'Howl' (CP:126-133), 'Transcription of organ music' (CP:140-141), 'America' (CP:146-148), 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170), and 'At Apollinaire's grave' (CP:180-182). Despite the fact that none of these poems are focused on metatextual speculation, the traces of such an awareness remain. In a way, this may be due to Ginsberg's habitual projection of himself into his poems, which automatically brings his own concerns and beliefs regarding poetry within the scope of the poem.

The obvious exception to this rule is 'POEM Rocket' (CP:163-164). After a description of the madness on planet earth and its diminutive stature within the cosmos (L 5-16), the speaker (as poet) aligns himself with the scientist who "gives us the moon/he promises the stars he'll make us a new universe if it comes to that" (L 13-14). This indirect reference to the role of the poet is followed by a more explicitly self-reflexive stance:

O fellow travelers I write you a poem in Amsterdam in the Cosmos
 where Spinoza ground his magic lenses long ago
 I write you a poem long ago
 (...)
 Will you eat my poems or read them
 or gaze with aluminium blind plates on sunless pages?
 do you dream or translate & accept data with indifferent droopings of antennae?

do I make sense to your flowery green receptor eyesockets? do you have visions of
God? (L 17-33)

The metaphor here is still implicit, but it is essentially that of the poem as a rocket, which is launched into space where "star talks to star multiple beams of sunlight all the same myriad thought" (L 23). Space is also a metaphoric construct in this poem. It refers as much to the actual world (and the cosmos beyond) as it does to a sense of cosmic being in which everything is related. The poem is concerned with what effect the poem as rocket will have on the world, especially how it will be received and if it will be understood. Furthermore, it is also concerned with how and if the poem as rocket reaches or attains certain spiritual qualities. This metaphor is made more explicit in the last section of the poem:

This is my rocket my personal rocket I send up my message Beyond
Someone to hear me there
My immortality
without steel or cobalt basalt or diamond gold or mercurial fire
without passports filing cabinets bits of paper warheads
without myself finally
pure thought
message all and everywhere the same
I send up my rocket to land on whatever planet awaits it
preferably religious sweet planets no money
(...)
joining the other notes mash-notes love-sighs complaints-musical shrieks of despair
and the million unutterable thoughts of frogs
I send you my rocket of amazing chemical
more than my hair my sperm or the cells of my body
the speeding thought that flies upward with my desire as instantaneous as the
universe and faster than light (L 35-51)

The poem is thus equated with immortality (L 37), pure thought (L 41) and desire (L 51), and all of these are included in the message that the poet sends out to the universe (to humanity and beyond). 'POEM Rocket' (CP:163-164) thus also becomes a kind of *ars poetica*, though wider in scope and more metaphoric than any of the other poems mentioned thus far.

'POEM Rocket' (CP:163-164) is really the only one of the longer Beat poems that deals self-reflexively with metatextual issues, but as already said, Ginsberg's overtly

personal approach to his poetry and his projection of himself as poet into his poems hint at a latent self-reflexive tendency. This is also apparent from the few cases in which metatextual metaphors are used, which are indicative of an awareness of the role that textuality and language have on human experience. 'Siesta in Xbalba' (CP:97-110) opens with such a metaphor:

Late sun opening the book,
 blank page like light,
 invisible words unscrawled,
 impossible syntax
 of apocalypse – (L 1-5)

Another example is to be found in 'POEM Rocket' (CP:163-164), where the speaker sees himself as having "no more body than the fine black tracery of pen mark on soft paper" (L 22). These metaphors, while not extensive or often repeated, nevertheless indicate some metatextual and self-reflexive tendencies in Ginsberg's Beat poetry.

A number of Ginsberg's Beat poems are focused and extensive reflections on the nature and function of language and poetry, and together with the frequent references to issues pertaining to writing as well as some metatextual metaphors, it establishes a link between Ginsberg's Beat poetry and the postmodernist characteristic of self-reflexivity. Of course, the subjectivity of Ginsberg's poetry causes such self-reflexivity almost to be expected, but one has to be careful not to equate any kind of musing on poetry with the typically postmodernist self-reflexivity. For the postmodernist, the focus lies on the nature of language and textuality, the role that it plays in perception, experience and society, and the limits that it places on these. Ginsberg's poetry only partially corresponds to this characteristic. It is certainly concerned with some of the above matters, but never develops it extensively as a crucial concern, or pushes its inquiry into the matter to such radical or extreme lengths as other developments within postmodernism.¹³² For example, in an interview with Brown and Novick (1992) he distances himself from what he calls the "semiotic, deconstructionist, Burroughsian view" of language which holds that

¹³² A typical postmodernist metafictional text would be Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1992). Of course, a distrust of language and of its function is already apparent in modernist writing (see for example Eliot's *Four Quartets*), but this concern is pushed to much more extreme lengths in postmodernist writing.

language is a means of abstraction which dooms people to "lose touch with detail". In response, Ginsberg states:

That's not my view at all. It's the opposite, in fact. I think it's a fascist statement, frankly. It attacks language and it attacks people talking. It's an attack on communication, actually. I would say that language joins heaven and earth and joins mind with body. It synchronizes them through speech, poetry, language and words which connect abstraction with the ground.

Ginsberg's poetry is obviously far removed from the radical kind of metalingual concern embodied by much of Burroughs' writing.¹³³ As always, Ginsberg's view remains more romantic, but the awareness of and concern with metatextual issues are nevertheless definitely present. In his *Indian journals* (Ginsberg, 1970) there are several instances of this awareness:

Poetry XX Century like all arts and sciences is devolving into examination-experiment on the very material of which it's made.

(...)

Now poetry instead of relying for effect on dreaminess of image or sharpness of visual phanopoeia – instead of conjuring a vision or telling a truth, stops. Because all visions & all truths are no longer considerable as objective & eternal facts, but as plastic projections of the maker & his language. So nobody can seriously go on passionately concerned with **effects** however seeming-real they be, when he knows inside all his visions & truths are empty, finally. So the next step is examination of the cause of these effects, the vehicle of the visions, the conceiver of the truth, which is: words. Language: the prime material itself.

So the next step is, how do you write poetry about poetry (not as objective abstract subject matter á la Robert Duncan or Pound) – but making use of a radical method eliminating subject matter altogether. (Ginsberg, 1970:38-39.)

He then continues by citing examples of such radical methods, by artists such as Gertrude Stein, Jack Kerouac, Antonin Artaud and the surrealists, John Ashbery, William S. Burroughs, and Gregory Corso. These methods include association, the breaking down of syntax, random juxtaposition, the arrangement of sounds and intuitive keywords (Ginsberg, 1970:39).

¹³³ Burroughs' view on language is particularly interesting, and much could be said about it. However, it will suffice to point out that Burroughs is much more definitely postmodernist than Ginsberg in his radical views on language, which are easily placed within a postmodernist rubric (see Skau, 1981 & Russell, 1980).

Despite this awareness, Ginsberg also admits that his writing delays moving into this metatextual realm:

I seem to be delaying a step forward in this field (elimination of subject matter) and hanging on to habitual humanistic series of autobiographical photographs ... – although my own Consciousness has gone beyond the conceptual to non-conceptual episodes of experience, inexpressible by old means of humanistic storytelling.

(...)

I really don't know what I'm doing now.

Begin a new page.

4.2.11 Intertextuality

I discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told. – *Umberto Eco* –

Since postmodernism acknowledges no boundaries – between reality and fiction, between individual texts, between different genres or between high and popular culture – and because postmodernists believe that we construct realities and selves through language (see Hassan, 1987:22), everything becomes textually linked. This is where the postmodernist idea of intertextuality develops from. Eco (1983a:67) regards intertextuality as one of the key characteristics of postmodernism. For him it involves a loss of innocence, a realisation that everything has already been said: “The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.” Russell (1985:263) similarly states that the “literary work can never claim complete originality and plagiarizes ... prior discourse, thus receiving life and meaning from what it defines itself against.” For McHale (1987:19) intertextuality is a form of boundary violation, where different texts link and loop, creating infinite chains of texts.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ A good analogy for the concept of intertextuality is the idea of hypertext. In a sense, for the postmodernist all text is hypertextual, in that every piece of text links to another, which in turn links to another and another and another – creating infinite chains of text that link back, loop and twist.

Again, postmodernism's deliberate exploration and exploitation of intertextuality involves a reaction against such ideas as self-reflexive autonomy and the organicism of the well-made poem, as propagated by the New Critics (Brooker, 1991:156). It deliberately places the art work or the poem within the flux of discourse – be it artistic, social, political, or from the present or the past. It is a widening of the scope of the art work, engaging it in a polylogue with other texts from other times, resulting in a text which is intentionally and often excessively polyphonic. Although intertextuality is at work in all texts (postmodernist or not), postmodernist texts deliberately and explicitly foreground their interactions with other texts – flaunting their intertextuality, so to speak.

Ginsberg's Beat poetry certainly shows some awareness of the intertextual relationships between texts. It displays this awareness in its constant allusions to other texts, evoking both the content and the context of these other texts within the poem, thus placing the poem within a chain of texts that interact with each other.

It has to be kept in mind that the term *text* not only refers to actual written texts, made up of words on a page. For the postmodernist, the social reality or political ideologies are just as much texts as poems, and people's life experiences or stories are textual constructs, just as a painting may be a text. For this reason, poetic references to individual people (be it cultural icons or personal friends) evoke the texts surrounding these people, which then interact with the poem (as in, for example, 'The blue angel' – CP:54). Social realities are also texts which may be evoked by references to the contemporary socio-political landscape or people within it (as in 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' – CP:167-170). However, all of these aspects have already been discussed in sections 4.2.3 to 4.2.7, and will therefore not be discussed in further detail here.

The most explicit instances of intertextuality, and the ones on which this section will focus, are those which relate to artistic texts, mostly in the forms of literary and visual art. These instances evoke other texts and their contexts which then engage in dialogue with the text on the page. However, as will become apparent in the following discussion, Ginsberg's typical intertextual technique most often takes a very particular form. Instead of incorporating fragments from other texts into his own poems, or playing with the material of other texts in the form of comment, parody

and so forth, he uses strategically selected words (often proper nouns) which function as the nodes by which elaborate texts are activated and evoked.

'On reading William Blake's 'Sick rose' (CP:6) is one of the first poems which rely on intertextual links. This poem developed from Ginsberg's 1949 visionary experience while reading Blake's 'The sick rose', and is therefore not only intertextually linked to Blake's poem, but also to Ginsberg's personal text. It has already been pointed out that this experience was a crucial influence on Ginsberg's Beat poetry, and Blake's visionary poetics clearly contributed to this. The poem then becomes a dialogue with Blake's, and the latter is activated and pervades Ginsberg's poem, which cannot be read without taking Blake's poem (and poetics) and its relationship to this poem (and Ginsberg's poetics) into account. Poems like 'Fyodor' (CP:32) and 'Cézanne's ports' (CP:53) function on a similar basis, and all express the development of a personal poetics in interaction with other texts.

'Bop lyrics' (CP:42-43) contains an oblique reference to Christopher Smart in its little refrain of "Smart went crazy/Smart went crazy" (L 6-7, 13-14). This is the only reference in the poem, but the mere mention of the name activates a different conglomerate of texts, which then permeates 'Bop lyrics' (CP:42-43). Smart was an eighteenth century poet, whose life and poetry shows much similarity with Ginsberg's.¹³⁵ Both poets had interludes of what was classified as madness and like Ginsberg's, Smart's poetry is concerned with visionary-spiritual issues, intermingled with details from everyday life. It is also strikingly similar in form to Ginsberg's with its long lines and repetitive structure. Consider the following example, from 'Jubilate Agno' (in Allison *et al.*, 1983:470-471):

For I will consider my Cat Jeffry.
 For he is the servant of the living God, duly and daily serving him.
 For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
 For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
 For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.
 For he rolls upon prank to work it in.
 For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.
 For this he performs in ten degrees.
 For first he looks upon his forepaws to see if they are clean.

¹³⁵ See Hunsberger (1984) for an extensive discussion of the links and similarities between Smart and Ginsberg's poetics.

For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.

For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the forepaws extended. (L 697-707)

Given this background, a whole new dimension is added to Ginsberg's poem. For example, once the reference to Smart has activated the additional text of his poetry and life, 'Bop lyrics' (CP:42-43) explicitly becomes part of a dialogue with the older text. This is particularly evident in the last stanza, which also establishes a link with the poem 'Fie my fum' (CP:23) by incorporating fragments from the latter poem:

I'm a pot and God's a potter,
 And my head's a piece of putty.
 Ark my darkness,
 Lark my looks,
 I'm so lucky to be nutty. (L 30-34)

Even this brief discussion gives an indication of the way in which the mere mention of a name can activate a myriad of textual links. These links then widen the scope of the poem, drawing it into conversation with other texts. The same process is followed in a poem like 'I have increased power' (CP:68-69) which is the first poem to explicitly establish multiple intertextual links, involving references to Hemingway (L 2-3), Shakespeare (L19-20) and Carl Solomon (L 35-40). These three (widely diverse) references and fragments mixed into the poem have the effect of making it branch out in many other directions, following the links to other texts. This denies the idea of the poem as a closed artefact and instead places the poem squarely within the chain of discourses. The poem then becomes not only Ginsberg's musing on death and time, but also a point where several texts (from the personal to the literary) intersect.

In general, the artistic intertextualities of Ginsberg's poetry are intended to link him up with artists and texts with preoccupations similar to his own. For example, there are two long poems dedicated to Walt Whitman, 'Love poem on a theme by Whitman' (CP:115) and 'A supermarket in California' (CP:136). Both these poems' explicit references to Whitman (as well as their Whitmanesque style) activate Whitman's *Leaves of grass* (of which the first version was published in 1855), as well as the text of his personal life. Thus Ginsberg's poetic concern with sexuality (and particularly homosexuality) as well as with the landscape of ordinary American life is placed in dialogue with Whitman's poetic views on the same issues.

'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170) is a more extensive example of this technique. It consists of an intermingling of social and literary references, which are generally opposed. The references to the social environment and the negative evaluation thereof have already been discussed extensively (see section 4.2.4). The literary references in this poem are numerous, and evoke a variety of different texts. Lorca and Whitman are mentioned in L 6, together with the Russian poet Mayakovsky (L 7, 47) and Hart Crane (L 8, 47, 80). Jean Genet makes an appearance (L 31), as do Vachel Lindsay (L 64, 81), Edgar Allen Poe (L 65), Ezra Pound (L 66), Blok, Antonin Artaud (L 68) and Van Gogh (L 69). Each of these names carry a myriad connections to texts and contexts which are thus linked into Ginsberg's poem, diffusing its borders. At this particular point of intersection, these texts all have something to say about alternatives to stultifying and corrupt societies.

'At Apollinaire's grave' (CP:180-182) is similar to 'Death to Van Gogh's ear!' (CP:167-170), in that it plays a corrupt society up against a more humane ideal represented by art and artists. In this case, the focus falls on the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, but the speaker's thoughts while sitting at Apollinaire's grave leads him to invoke the names of many other artists as well: Max Jacob (L 36), Pablo Picasso (L 37), Rousseau (L 38), Tristan Tzara (L 40), André Breton (L 44), Blaise Cendrars (L 46), Jacques Vaché (L 47), Jean Cocteau (L 48), Rigaut (L 49), Gide (L 50), Whitman (L 52) and Mayakovsky (L 57).

Ginsberg then goes on to place himself (as poet) within their company, conversing with them and participating in their parties:

Here in Paris I am your guest O friendly shade
 the absent hand of Max Jacob
 Picasso in youth bearing me a tube of Mediterranean
 myself attending Rousseau's old red banquet I ate his violin
 great party at the Bateau Lavoir not mentioned in the textbooks of Algeria
 Tzara in the Bois de Boulogne explaining the alchemy of the machineguns of the
 cuckoos
 he weeps translating me into Swedish
 (...)
 he spoke endlessly of his quarrels with André Breton
 whom he had helped one day trim his golden mustache
 old Blaise Cendrars received me into his study and spoke wearily of the enormous
 lengths of Siberia

Jacques Vaché invited me to inspect his terrible collection of pistols (L 35-47)

Again, the mention of these names evoke linking and mingling texts, and Ginsberg's own writing is evoked in the mention of Tzara translating his (Ginsberg's) poetry (L 41). The intertextual relationships between texts are thus made very explicit in this poem, also by placing the Ginsberg-persona directly in the company of the mentioned artists. Another such link is established in L 11, where the speaker wishes to pay homage to Apollinaire by laying "my temporary American Howl on top of his silent Calligramme". This poem thus clearly expresses an awareness that all texts are related and are continually conversing with each other.

This technique is evident in many other of Ginsberg's poems, such as 'Howl' (CP:126-133), 'I, Gnu' (CP:203-205) and 'POEM Rocket' (CP:163-164), thus indicating a definite awareness of the continual interaction between texts. This awareness of intertextuality comes to the fore especially in Ginsberg's use of almost iconic names which activate an intertextual relationship between the poem and a myriad other texts. These texts may be philosophical, religious, artistic, social or personal. Often, they have something to say about Ginsberg's poetic concerns, as well as social and personal issues. However, it needs to be emphasised that the postmodernist characteristic of intertextuality is not as extensively or intensely developed in Ginsberg's poetry as in some other strains of postmodernism. It appears to have less to do with a self-conscious attempt to foreground textual relationships and more with a need to express the impact of certain texts (be they artistic, social or personal) on Ginsberg's poetic development. Nevertheless, Ginsberg's particular brand of intertextuality at least initiates the more experimental and extensive development of later postmodernism, and furthermore also works towards the violation of boundaries between artistic, personal and social experiences by regarding them all as textual constructs that meet within the scope of the poem.¹³⁶

4.3 Conclusion

Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry may thus be regarded as part of the literary and sociological development which initiated and participated in the development from

¹³⁶ An explicit play with intertextuality seems to be a characteristic of postmodernist fiction, rather than poetry. A text like Peter Ackroyd's *English music* (1992) is exemplary.

modernism to postmodernism. This process involves the **rejection of the central tenets of high modernism** and the simultaneous development of **social countercultural movements** in America during the 1940s and 1950s. Ginsberg's Beat poetics has played a definite role in both these aspects, and therefore his position and influence in the early phase of postmodernism is unmistakable.

This assumption is further supported by the argument, presented in this chapter, that Ginsberg's Beat poetry does show some correspondence with the model of (early) postmodernist characteristics set out in section 2.4.6. Ginsberg's Beat poetry definitely shares the postmodernist characteristic of the **suspicion of metanarratives**, and is also highly **experimental and innovative**. This combined critical stance and experimentalism is, in one sense, a continuation of the original avant-garde modernist project, but is also simultaneously a reaction against the strictures of the institutionalised form of high modernism. The **activist intention** of Beat poetry also links it with the origins of postmodernism, which, as has been argued, is largely defined by its return to avant-garde aesthetics. Furthermore, both Beat and postmodernist aesthetics participate in the dismantling of cultural hegemonies by not only questioning dominant systems of thought, but also by **blurring the distinctions between cultural hierarchies**, particularly through the assimilation of **mass culture** into the previously inviolable domain of art.

The early postmodernist characteristics of **delight, play and performance**, as well as **immediacy and intensity** are also particularly characteristic of Ginsberg's Beat poetry. However, there are also some postmodernist characteristics with which Ginsberg's Beat poetry has an uneasy relationship. Characteristics like the problem of **subjective presence and individual identity**, **self-reflexivity** and **intertextuality** are certainly present in Ginsberg's poetry, but are never elaborated to quite such a radical extent as in later postmodernist developments.

From these comments it may be surmised that Ginsberg's Beat poetry is best regarded as **transitional** in the development of modernism to postmodernism. His poetics is definitely indebted to avant-garde ideas, assimilated into a personal framework as part of a personal and literary reaction against high modernist poetics. Since the origins of postmodernism are to be found precisely in this kind of development, Ginsberg's Beat poetry may be seen as participating in the processes

of social and literary change which initiated the development from high modernism to early postmodernism.