

# **Beat poetry and the twentieth century: Allen Ginsberg**

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twentieth century:  
Allen Ginsberg**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry within the framework of twentieth-century literary developments, from modernism to postmodernism. It is argued that Beat writing is founded on a rejection of the detached, intellectual and formal nature of the high modernism which came to be institutionalised in the American literary practice of the 1950s. Beat poetry rejects this tradition in favour of an eclectic assemblage of ideas which may, either through direct influence or through parallel development, be linked to certain avant-garde modernist movements. All of these movements share assumptions which support and echo the personal and spiritual vision of Beat aesthetics, as well as its formal experimentation. This eclectic assemblage also involves the assimilation of the ideas of modernist movements often held to be in conflict, embodying opposing strains of modernism. This dynamic is illustrated by analysing the influence of two such opposing modernist influences on Ginsberg's Beat poetry, namely imagism and surrealism. Finally, it is argued that this double gesture of a rejection of the institutionalised form of high modernism and a simultaneous re-assessment of the avant-garde constitutes a crucial step in the development towards postmodernism. Together with the surfacing of postmodernist characteristics in Ginsberg's Beat poetry, this forms the basis for the conclusion that Ginsberg's Beat poetry may be regarded as playing a transitional and initiating role in the literary evolution from modernism to postmodernism.

### **Keywords**

Allen Ginsberg, Beat poetry, Beat Generation, American poetry, modern poetry, modernism, imagism, surrealism, postmodernism

## Opsomming

Hierdie verhandeling ondersoek die Beatpoësie van Allen Ginsberg binne die raamwerk van die twintigste-eeuse letterkundige ontwikkeling van modernisme tot postmodernisme. Daar word van die veronderstelling uitgegaan dat Beatpoësie gefundeer is op 'n verwerping van die afsydige, hoogs intellektuele en formele aard van hoogmodernisme wat geïnstitutionaliseer is in Amerikaanse letterkundige praktyke in die vyftigerjare. Beatpoësie verwerp hierdie tradisie ten gunste van 'n eklektiese assimilasië van idees wat oënskynlik by sekere avant-garde modernistiese strominge aansluiting vind, hetsy deur direkte invloed of deur middel van parallelle ontwikkeling. Al hierdie strominge is gebaseer op veronderstellings wat die persoonlike en spirituele visie van die Beatskrywers asook hulle formele eksperimentering ondersteun en eggo. Hierdie eklektiese samevoeging behels ook die assimilasië van idees uit modernistiese strominge wat dikwels as strydig met mekaar beskou word. Die dinamika hiervan word geïllustreer aan die hand van 'n analise van die invloed van twee sulke teenstrydige modernistiese strominge op Ginsberg se Beatpoësie, naamlik imagisme en surrealisme. Ten slotte word betoog dat hierdie dubbele gebaar van verwerping van die geïnstitutionaliseerde vorm van hoogmodernisme en die gelyktydige herwaardering van die avant-garde 'n belangrike stap in die ontwikkeling tot postmodernisme konstitueer. Tesame met die opkoms van postmodernistiese karakteristieke in Ginsberg se Beatpoësie vorm dit die basis van die slotsom dat Ginsberg se Beatpoësie beskou kan word as sou dit 'n oorgangs- en inisiërende rol gespeel het in die ontwikkeling van modernisme tot postmodernisme.

### Trefwoorde

Allen Ginsberg, Beatpoësie, Beatgenerasië, Amerikaanse poësie, moderne poësie, modernisme, imagisme, surrealisme, postmodernisme

# 1. Introduction: statement of problem, aims and methods

## 1.1 Contextualisation and problem statement

This dissertation aims to investigate the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg in the broad terms of its position within twentieth-century literary developments from modernism to postmodernism. It will firstly examine the relationship of Beat poetry to the anterior literary and sociological movement of modernism. The emphasis will fall on the Beats' rejection of the detached, intellectualised and formal developments of the institutionalised form of high modernism, as well as on their eclectic appropriation and parallel exploration of the ideas and techniques of other modernist movements which supported their project of "positive repudiation" (Everson, 1981:181). The relationship of Ginsberg's Beat and later poetry to the postmodernist context will also be investigated, with the aim of determining the extent to which it may be argued that Ginsberg's poetry develops in the direction of a postmodernist poetics, or initiates and supports such developments. This discussion will particularly focus on the possible transitional role of Beat poetry in the development of twentieth-century poetry.

The recent deaths of Allen Ginsberg<sup>1</sup> and William S. Burroughs<sup>2</sup>, two of the founder members of the Beat movement, have launched an abundance of critical as well as popular attention to the Beat Generation and its literature. Together with Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs formed the core of a group of friends and artists<sup>3</sup> who shared a personal and creative vision that challenged both the dominant social norms and the literary tradition prevalent in the USA after World War II (Charters, 1993:582-583). Moreover, the Beat writers (quite unintentionally) came to be

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<sup>1</sup> Ginsberg died on April 5, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Burroughs died on August 2, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> The term *Beat Generation* or *Beat writers* is often used to refer to a much wider group of writers, associated with the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance of the 1950s. Although there is much cross-influence, the Beat Generation and the San Francisco poets cannot ultimately be regarded as the same group. This issue is discussed further in section 2.2.2. For now it will suffice to emphasise that this dissertation (unless otherwise indicated) uses the term *Beat Generation* in its narrowest sense to refer to the core group of writers and friends consisting of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs.

regarded as the representatives of an entire youth subculture (George & Starr, 1985:203). They became the spokespersons for a generation who felt themselves culturally and historically orphaned by World War II, who believed that the political, religious and artistic values of conservative American society were outmoded and inadequate, and who explored alternative lifestyles and innovative ways of expressing themselves. They rejected conservative and bourgeois values, and experimented with drugs, sex and criminal activity as ways of asserting their belief in personal freedom.

However, the Beat movement was not only about rejection and denial, as many of its early critics asserted (see Hyde, 1984 for examples). It was also an attempt to create a positive and inventive personal, communal and artistic vision that would reassert the power of spontaneity and emotion, re-establish the importance of the individual and foster the creation of a new and personal spirituality. Despite the varying emphases, styles and beliefs of the writers within the group, these basic assumptions lie at the core of Beat writing and the Beat subculture. This ethos of resistance and affirmation has been taken over (in various forms and with various emphases) by subsequent youth subcultures, such as the hippie movement of the sixties, the punk movement of the eighties, and the grunge and rave movements of the 1990s. Furthermore, George and Starr (1985:203-204) point out that the Beats' defiance of white middle-class standards also set the pattern for the black, youth, women's and gay revolutions to follow, since all of these movements, like the Beat movement, were based on an ethos which stopped trying to justify its failure to meet white middle-class standards, and instead enthusiastically delegitimated and dismantled the culture of domination.

Seen in this light, the sociological importance of the Beat movement and its literature seems undeniable, and it is also to this aspect of the movement that many researchers turn their attention. However, understanding the Beat movement as complex phenomenon requires more than a sociological perspective focusing on the role that the Beat writers played in the formation of the counterculture in post-war America, and how this countercultural movement is related to antecedent and subsequent movements. It is also necessary to evaluate Beat literature from the perspective of its **literary** ethos, and to determine how its literary nature is related to preceding and following developments in the arts. As Stephenson (1990:4) puts it, the Beat Generation

evolved out of a confluence of influences – inheriting certain ideas from the 'madmen and outlaws' of the previous generation and drawing from sources further back as well; and then, in its turn bequeathing a legacy of ideas to be moderated by the generation that has followed it.

This seems a particularly relevant approach to follow in a study of Beat poetry, since the movement is so often defined in terms of its reactionary nature and its rejection of the dominant literary tradition of the time, but also because the Beats obviously eclectically assimilated fragments from previous traditions to create new expressive styles. These styles in turn became adapted, transformed and absorbed into succeeding literary developments.

The relevance of a dissertation dealing with Beat poetry in a wider socio-literary context may then firstly be justified by regarding it as a contribution to the current discourse on Beat writing. This dissertation aims to bring an innovative perspective to the particularly literary-historical dimension of the Beat movement, attempting to place the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg within the complex literary developments of the twentieth century. It is hoped that this contribution will go some way in presenting an interpretation of the Beat movement and its poetry that is sensitive to both the socio-cultural and literary dimensions, without inclining too far in one or the other direction.

The literary movement of modernism formed the basis of the literary tradition in America of the 1950s, but it was a largely reduced form of modernism which abandoned many aspects of the modernist movement and almost exclusively institutionalised the high modernist style of writers like T. S. Eliot (Holmes, 1981:5-6). Qualities such as impersonality, detachment, scholasticism, classicism, formalism and introspection were regarded as the hallmarks of "good" literature, an approach which was further supported by the dominance of the New Critical School of literary criticism during this time (Tytell, 1979:29). As Russell (1985:242) points out, in post-war America especially, literary criticism was "dominated by the New Critics, whose formalist values are clearly tied to the premises of literary modernism".

This was the legacy of modernism that the Beats reacted against (Holmes, 1981:6-7 and Everson, 1981:191). The Beats felt that high modernism's negation needed to

be balanced by some kind of positive affirmation, and they reacted against the sterility, futility, indifference and impersonality which was the ultimate result of modernist thought and art in America.

However, it also needs to be emphasised that in many other aspects the Beats not only shared some common characteristics with modernist writers, but also appropriated styles from various movements within the variegated movement of modernism. The Beats, like the modernists, were part of a post-war generation who experienced a sense of disillusionment with and rebelliousness against dominant cultural mores. They felt the need to experiment with new modes of living and desired to find new ways of expressing their experience of a rapidly changing world (Stephenson, 1990:4). Within the movement of modernism the Beat writers found other writers who struggled with the same problems, and who shared their sense of spirituality, individuality, spontaneity and freedom of expression. A preliminary study of critical evaluations and interpretations of Beat writing indicated definite parallels between Beat poetry and several artistic movements associated with modernism, as well as direct influences from modernist movements on Beat aesthetics. Movements mentioned in these sources include imagism, abstract expressionism, primitivism, surrealism and dadaism (see Stephenson, 1990:4-16, 172-186; Tytell, 1976:226-235; Géfin, 1984:278-279 and Docherty, 1995:199). All of these movements emphasised aspects of modernism that the institutionalised form of high modernism in America had seemed to have repudiated.

From the above movements imagism and surrealism (together with dadaism) were selected for further investigation in this dissertation. The motivation for this selection relies firstly on the assumption that these movements are of crucial importance and significance in the modernist revolution. Secondly, though links, influences and similarities are often acknowledged and briefly discussed, there seems to be little systematic and extensive research in terms of the influence of these movements on Beat poetry. Furthermore, the movements of imagism and surrealism are often seen as mutually incompatible, with differing aims, beliefs and approaches embodying two opposing strains of modernist thought. However, this dissertation proposes that Ginsberg's eclectic adaptation of modernist poetics involves the assimilation of movements often thought to be in conflict.

Furthermore, Ginsberg's poetry also seems to move beyond the modernist legacy in several ways, some of which might possibly be related to postmodernism. The question that arises here is whether developments initiated by Beat poetry might be related to the development of postmodernist poetics. This possible angle on an interpretation of Beat poetry is largely unexplored, and virtually no research on the topic could be found in the preliminary investigation. Nevertheless, the possibility of such an angle is supported by various critics who mention the importance of the Beats in the transition from modernism to postmodernism (see Russell, 1985:242; Huyssen, 1986:188 and Antin, 1995:71).

The choice of Ginsberg's poetry for a dissertation dealing with Beat poetry and its relationship to both anterior and subsequent movements should be fairly obvious. Firstly, Ginsberg's Beat poetry is often regarded as representative of Beat beliefs and poetics, supported by the fact that he was the only one of the core group of Beats who devoted his writing exclusively to poetry.<sup>4</sup> Ginsberg has also gradually

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<sup>4</sup> When referring to the general characteristics or assumptions of Beat writing it is important to keep in mind that Beat poetics is by no means a unified, fixed or homogenous concept. Although the Beats share certain assumptions, the three writers at the movement's core had very different and highly individualistic styles, despite their common beliefs. **Jack Kerouac** died at a young age, and most of his literary achievements were completed in the years of 1950-1957, during which he wrote twelve novels, including his most famous and popular work *On the road* (1957), the "bible of the Beat Generation" according to sensationalistic publisher's hype (Hayward, 1991). His writing has a distinct autobiographical style, and his later works show an increasing concern with Zen-Buddhism, typical of the personal and spiritual concerns of the Beat writers. Unfortunately, critical appreciation and evaluation have been slow in coming for Kerouac, whose work has rarely been approached academically – particularly his poetry. It is only recently that serious critical attention has been paid to Kerouac's prolific literary output. **William S. Burroughs**, on the other hand, has successfully navigated the passage from underground cult writer to an acknowledged force in contemporary writing. His career stretches from the 1940s until recently, and his idiosyncratic science-fiction style novels, often controversial in both style and content, have been the subject of studies on contemporary science fiction, postmodernist fiction, and pop-culture (see for example Skau, 1984; Wood, 1996; Mathieson, 1985 & Russell, 1980). Within the core group of Beat writers, Burroughs is exceptional for his staunch anti-romanticism and his disdain for future possibilities (Tyrell, 1979:13), which rather sets him apart from the idealism shared by Kerouac and Ginsberg. In a sense, this might also account for his increasing recognition among postmodern literary theorists and critics. Despite this acknowledgement, Burroughs is still very much a cult figure, more so than any of the other original Beats, due to not only his idiosyncratic lifestyle and his literary reputation, but also due to his artistic involvement with other alternative artists like Laurie Anderson, Tom Waits and REM, which has further established him as one of the underground icons of contemporary culture. **Allen Ginsberg's** poetry incorporates a profound

become the spokesperson and chronicler of the movement, as well as icon and godfather for its successors, starting off with the hippie movement of the 1960s. Secondly, his long publishing career, extending from the 1950s until the 1980s, emphasises the importance of Beat poetics as a constant force in contemporary poetry. Using Ginsberg's poetry for an investigation of Beat poetry, should make it possible to determine not only where Beat poetry developed **from**, but also where it developed **to**.

The above contextualising comments are intended to give some indication of the ideas that prompted the investigation undertaken in this dissertation, and from it, the main questions directing this study can be formulated as follows:

1. What is the position of the Beat Generation within the development of American poetry in the twentieth century?
2. What did Beat poetry gain from the influence of the anterior literary and sociological movement of modernism, and how is this manifested in the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg?
3. What influence did Beat poetry have on the development of postmodernist poetics, and in which ways would this be evident from Ginsberg's poetry?

## 1.2 Aims

1. To examine the position of the Beat Generation in the development of American poetry in the twentieth century.
2. To examine the relationship of Beat poetry to the anterior literary and sociological movement of modernism, and indicate how this relationship is manifested in the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg.
3. To examine the influence of Beat poetry on the development of postmodernist poetics, and indicate in which ways this may be evident from Ginsberg's poetry.

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social commitment, especially to environmental and human rights issues, leading on from his continuous involvement with activist groups. However, his poetry is also intensely personal and concerned with spiritual issues, with a definite mystical slant. Ginsberg's poetry is often regarded as definitive of the Beat ethos, more so than the work of Burroughs or even Kerouac, and incorporates most of the characteristics set out in the introductory part of this dissertation.

### 1.3 Thesis statement

This dissertation will investigate the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg in terms of a developmental, social and literary-historical context, reading Ginsberg's poetry within the framework of literary developments in the twentieth century, from modernism to postmodernism. It will be argued that the Beats rejected the more detached, intellectual and formal developments within (high) modernism that came to be institutionalised in the American literary practice of the 1950s. Beat poetry rejected this tradition in favour of an eclectic assemblage of ideas which may, either through direct influence or through parallel development, be linked to certain modernist movements. All of these movements shared assumptions which supported and echoed the personal and spiritual vision of the Beat writers as well as their formal experimentation. This eclectic assemblage involves the assimilation of the ideas of other modernist movements often held to be in conflict, embodying opposing strains of modernism. This dynamic will be illustrated by analysing the influence of two such opposing modernist influences on Ginsberg's Beat poetry, namely imagism and surrealism. Finally, it will be argued that Ginsberg's Beat poetry in significant ways surpasses the modernist legacy, but that the relationship of his poetry to postmodernism is problematic. In the same way that Ginsberg eclectically appropriates modernist tendencies, his approximation of postmodernist developments also remains eclectic and highly individual, hinting at, suggesting and initiating postmodernist developments rather than being what could be regarded as radically and/or explicitly postmodernist – in so far as this is possible to determine. Ultimately, it is postulated that Beat poetry's role in the development of postmodernism is best seen as transitional, navigating the transition from high modernism to early postmodernism.

### 1.4 Method

This dissertation will deal with issues of literature from a **literary, sociological** as well as **(literary)-historical** perspective, and therefore the question of method may easily become problematic due to the scope of the approach. The informing assumptions of the dissertation therefore need to be clarified. When dealing with historical perspectives on the development of literary traditions, one may easily fall into the trap of a supposed objectivity. This dissertation claims no such objectivity, but acknowledges that any demarcation of literary and historical developments into

single terms is always a subjective invention to designate a segment within a continuum of development, a segment which is usually retrospectively perceived to contain within it developments with similar backgrounds, objectives and approaches.

Therefore the frameworks constructed in this dissertation for terms such as *modernism*, *Beat movement*, *imagism*, *surrealism* and *postmodernism* should be regarded against the background of the aims of this dissertation, and not interpreted as objective reconstructions or final definitions.

Furthermore, the aims of this dissertation presuppose assumptions which deal with patterns of development in history, sociology and literature which are inseparably interrelated, and therefore most theoretical suppositions are implicitly drawn from theoretical frameworks which are sensitive to issues of social, ideological and literary interrelationship and change. Typically, theories such as Marxism and Russian Formalism, among others, may be seen to have influenced the basic approach of this dissertation. However, the various theoretical bases are not regarded as closed entities, but are appropriated in a highly eclectic way.

Having clarified the basic theoretical bias of the research, it also needs to be pointed out that the theoretical component remains largely tacit, except in cases where particular theories become relevant. This will be primarily the case in the section dealing with postmodernism, where various theories of postmodernism may be considered for the purposes of drawing up a framework for this dissertation. This will also be the case in the section on modernism, where a similar approach will be followed, though on a smaller scale. In the final instance, though, this dissertation is not primarily concerned with the theoretical or philosophical dimensions of the relevant artistic movements, but rather with the artistic practice within its particular social environment.

To create a coherent background against which Ginsberg's poetry as well as the modernist and postmodernist movements dealt with in this dissertation may be approached and evaluated, it seems necessary to first present some preliminary discussions on the modernist, postmodernist and Beat movements in their entirety, focusing on the social, historical and literary implications and relations of the terms. These discussions will follow the introduction to make up chapter 2 of the dissertation. The discussions presented in this chapter are also intended to clarify

the meaning of terminology as used in the dissertation. After these preliminary discussions, the dissertation will proceed to a specific discussion of the influence of modernist poetics on the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg. This chapter will investigate the Beats' reaction against high modernist poetics, as well as their appropriation and integration of ideas from the modernist movements of imagism and surrealism. This chapter will also contain discussions of poems from volumes of Ginsberg's poetry published in the Beat era, to support the proposed argument. Chapter 4 will move beyond modernism, and focus on the possibility that Ginsberg's development of Beat poetics may have some relationship to the development of postmodernism. Here also, poetry from volumes published during the Beat era will be investigated to examine this possible relationship. This investigation will elaborate on the framework for postmodernism already outlined in chapter 2, and indicate some of the possible links between some postmodernist characteristics and Ginsberg's Beat poetics. The results of these investigations can be found in the summary and conclusion which make up chapter 5.

### 1.5 Selection of texts

The fact that Ginsberg's publishing career stretches well into the 1990s together with his prolific output as writer makes it impossible to evaluate his entire oeuvre, and therefore it was decided to focus only on volumes regarded as most representative of Beat poetry. The most famous and notorious poem of Ginsberg's Beat writing is of course 'Howl', which was published in 1956 in the collection *Howl and other poems*, containing poems written from 1955-1956. Since this remains the most definitive collection of Ginsberg's Beat poetry, the poems collected in this volume of poetry will form the main basis of discussion. Additionally, poems collected in *Allen Ginsberg: collected poems 1947-1980* in the sections *Empty mirror: gates of wrath* (containing poems written from 1947-1952), *The green automobile* (1953-1954), *Reality sandwiches: Europe! Europe!* (1957-1959) and *Kaddish and related poems* (1959-1960)<sup>5</sup> will also be discussed, since all of these collections still fall within the era of Beat poetry.

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<sup>5</sup> In the anthology *Allen Ginsberg: collected poems: 1947-1980* (Ginsberg, 1984c) the poet reorders all his publications in chronological order, dividing them into "ten sections, roughly indicating time, geography, and motif or 'season' of experience" (Ginsberg, 1984c:xx). This categorisation roughly follows the volumes as they were originally published, but some volumes are collected under one

These selections are made with no claim to objectivity or complete representativeness. However, every attempt was made to include as wide a variety of poems as possible, so to at least approximate some kind of representativeness. In the final instance, though, all choices are subjective, though usually motivated from a critical perspective, in that most of the poems included in the discussions are canonised and critically accepted examples of Ginsberg's Beat poetry.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Introduction

Before proceeding to the actual investigation of the position of Beat poetry in the development of twentieth-century poetry, it is necessary to focus the attention on some background aspects. In particular, this initial section will concentrate on the three main literary-historical movements that this dissertation is concerned with: the Beat movement, the movement of modernism, and the relationship of modernism to postmodernism.<sup>6</sup> Despite the multifarious problems associated with literary-historical categorisation<sup>7</sup>, it is, for pragmatic reasons, necessary to create a singular and coherent construct of terms if one intends to engage meaningfully with texts from a literary-historical perspective, and if one wants to communicate this engagement to others. The aim of this section is therefore to present general discussions of the above-mentioned movements, in order to create applicable, consistent, coherent and productive frameworks from which the thesis of this dissertation may be approached.

### 2.2 The Beat Generation as literary and sociological movement

The best things come, as a general thing, from the talents that are members of a group; every man works better when he has companions working in the same line, and yielding the stimulus of suggestion, comparison, emulation. – *William James* –

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<sup>6</sup> The capitalisation of these three terms has the potential to be problematic. In this dissertation the convention of capitalising the term Beat is followed, mainly because the term is used mostly in a very specific way to refer to a particular and clearly defined artistic movement. The terms *modernism* and *postmodernism* (as well as *imagism* and *surrealism*), on the other hand, are not capitalised, since they are used as more general and fluid collectives and not as specific denominators of distinct movements. For the sake of consistency, this convention is followed throughout this dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> The discussion proceeds on the assumption that the referents of all literary terms such as *modernism*, *postmodernism* or *Beat movement* do or did not exist as an *actual* fact of reality (McHale, 1987:4). Instead these terms of categorisation are best regarded as literary-historical fictions (or diachronic and synchronic constructs) fabricated retrospectively by readers, historians, theorists and writers, as attempts to understand the flux of artistic developments through imposing some kind of coherent structure on them (Hassan, 1993:149). Seen in this way, one becomes aware of the fact that there are bound to be a multiplicity of fictions assembled around the nature of such “discursive constructs” (McHale, 1987:4) as *modernism*, *postmodernism* and *Beat movement*. Of course, since all of these constructions are ultimately fictions, there is no *one* true or valid definition of these terms.

You can't lump all writers together – not even the Bohemians. – *Michael Hayward* –

Most often, the categorisation of literary developments into movements or groups is nothing but a convenient and simplifying process of labelling which is established retrospectively by those who are outside of that which is being named (Hayward, 1991). However, in studying developments in literature, it also becomes apparent that in many cases, artists have found themselves **consciously** cohering in natural groups, sharing the same assumptions, ideals and artistic styles. Consider, for example, the importance of social groupings and affiliations within the modernist movement (see Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991), or even within the context of Romanticism.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the Beat Generation writers consisted of a tightly knit group of friends, with shared beliefs, perspectives, sensibilities and ideals which transcended their (sometimes radical) individual personal and artistic differences (Stephenson, 1990:8 and Foster, 1992:4). As Holmes (1981:6) puts it, "all these writers more or less instantly recognised a similarity of life-attitude and aesthetic-direction in each other and, felt less alone, and drew fresh energy, from that recognition". For the Beats, as for other similar self-conscious artistic groups (like the imagists and the surrealists), the group provided a sense of community and identity, served as a means of social and artistic support in their desire for artistic, personal and socio-political change, while also functioning as a way of setting themselves apart from the mainstream literary developments of their time (Watson, 1995:xi).

The Beat movement as a literary and social grouping seems, at least initially, to have been a conscious and deliberate endeavour. However, as already indicated earlier, the pitfalls associated with categorisation (even if it is initiated by the members of the group themselves) are multitudinous, with the result that several problematic areas develop when dealing with the literature of the Beat writers. This section of the chapter will address several of these problems, with the eventual aim of providing a

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<sup>8</sup> These affiliations took various forms, varying from explicit aesthetic and political manifestos issued by artists who strongly identified themselves and their art with the ideals and assumptions of a closely knit group (like the imagists or surrealists) that frequently met socially in order to discuss and promote their art, to personal friendships and artistic encouragement (as exemplified in the role of Ezra Pound in the modernist movement).

clear working knowledge and definition of the Beat movement and its writers. Firstly, this section will provide an assessment of the term *Beat* and its use in the expressions *Beat movement*, *Beat Generation* and *Beat writers*, in order to elucidate the sociological and literary nature of the movement and its various developments. From there it will proceed to clarify the core participants in the Beat movement as literary phenomenon. The socio-political context of the movement will also be discussed, specifically in relation to the Beat movement as countercultural or avant-garde experiment. In conclusion, a discussion of the most distinctive characteristics of Beat literature will be presented, as part of a working definition of Beat literature.

### 2.2.1 Beatness and the development of the movement

The word *beat* is derived from circus and carnival argot, reflecting the circumstances of nomadic existence (Watson, 1995:3). Kerouac (quoted in Foster, 1992:7) thought that it might have come from "some midwest carnival or junk cafeteria". George and Starr (1985:194) declare that the term was taken from the jive<sup>9</sup> talk of jazz musicians. Herbert Huncke, one of the ever-present hipster-figures in the Beat culture, picked up the word in his experiences in the criminal and drug world of Chicago, and in the fall of 1945 he introduced it to William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the core of a circle of friends and associations that eventually formed the Beat movement (George & Starr, 1985:194). Initially the group took the word simply to mean "mind-your-own-business" as in the expression "beat it" (Foster, 1992:7), but Huncke also used it in the sense of "the world against me", and Kerouac (quoted in Foster, 1992:7) described the meaning as "poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways". Ginsberg (quoted in Charters, 1993:583) described beatness as "looking at society from the underside". In the drug world, *beat* meant to be robbed or cheated. Kerouac, in conversation with John Clellon Holmes, put these ideas into historical perspective when he remarked that his generation was a "beat generation" (George & Starr, 1985:195). Holmes, a writer and theorist associated with the Beats, appropriated the idea and introduced it into popular currency in his seminal November 1952 article for the *New York Times Magazine*, entitled 'This is the Beat Generation'. In this article, Holmes wrote that

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<sup>9</sup> Jive is a kind of code language or slang, used in particular by hipsters and drug addicts (Tytell, 1979:21-22).

[a]ny attempt to label an entire generation is unrewarding, and yet the generation which went through the last war, or at least could get a drink easily once it was over, seems to possess a uniform, general quality which demands an adjective ... The origins of the word 'beat' are obscure, but the meaning is only too clear to most Americans. More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself (Holmes, 1952).

However, by the 1950s Kerouac and Ginsberg had increasingly begun to emphasise the beatific quality of beat (Foster, 1992:7), investing the viewpoint of the defeated with a mystical and transcendent perspective. According to Allen Ginsberg (quoted in Watson, 1995:4) the "point of Beat is that you get beat down to a certain nakedness where you actually are able to see the world in a visionary way, which is the old classical understanding of what happens in the dark night of the soul". Jack Kerouac defined the Beat Generation as "the generation that came of age after World War II, who, supposedly as a result of disillusionment stemming from the Cold War, espouse mystical detachment and relaxation of social and sexual tensions" (quoted in Watson, 1995:5).

Both these definitions indicate the double-sided nature of the Beat movement: its sense of negation coupled with affirmation, revolt with creative spirituality, and disillusionment with ecstatic and mystical personal vision (see also Everson, 1981:193).<sup>10</sup> As Prothero (1991:210) points out, the Beats

sought to move beyond predictions of social apocalypse and depictions of individual sadness to some transcendental hope .... Thus the Beats' flight from the churches and synagogues of the suburbs to city streets inhabited by whores and junkies, hobos and jazzmen never ceased to be a search for something to believe in, something to go by.

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<sup>10</sup> Many of the Beats' early critics failed to take this into account, and regarded Beat poetry merely in terms of negativity, destructiveness and revolt. For example, Rosenthal (1984:29) describes the poems in *Howl and other poems* as "sustained shrieks of frantic defiance", as "anguished anathema hurling in which the poet's revulsion is expressed with the single-minded frenzy of a raving madwoman" in a "childishly aggressive vocabulary of obscenity". This oversight forms the basis of Kenneth Rexroth's (1984:32-33) essay on the whole issue, first published in the *Evergreen Review* of 1957. He attacks critics for only reading a message of "total assault" and "negativity" (Rexroth, 1984:32, 33), and not understanding that this message is also that "We must love one another or die", and that this approach forms the basis of a marvellous potential for spirituality and humanity.

It is obvious that Kerouac's definition of the Beat movement emphasises the sociological aspect of the movement, and extends it to define an entire generation. However, the Beat Generation did not suddenly and consciously appear fully formed on the conservative American scene of the 1950s, but gradually developed from the ideas and expressions of the cultural avant-garde of the time (Hayward, 1991). This countercultural movement forms part of a chain of countercultural or reactionary movements extending back through history (see section 2.2.3). The heritages of these – often intricately related – cultural and specifically literary bohemian movements, converged in a small group of friends and writers living in New York during the 1940s and 1950s – including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. It is around the ideas and creative expressions of these writers that the Beat movement is built.

During the formative years of the movement, extending throughout the 1940s, the Beats were relatively unknown, except in the immediate bohemian and criminal circle of friends and acquaintances in New York. However, after the publication of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the road* (1957), and Allen Ginsberg's seminal Six Gallery reading of 'Howl' (October 13, 1955) the Beat writers became notorious celebrities (Charters, 1993:584). They were the idols of a younger generation of rebels, and the source of dismay for an older generation of conservatives (Stephenson, 1990:15). Literary critics, steeped in the dominant tradition of New Criticism (Tytell, 1979:29) rejected and vilified Beat literature on several grounds. For example, a critic for the *National Review* wrote in 1961 that the poetry of the Beats was "an overflow as accidental as a bathtub running over", and that their "artistic revolt" was "as graceless and unproductive as the copulation of mules" (quoted in Charters, 1993:589). Critics like Randall Jarrell felt that the Beats' emphasis on personal experience as the basis of art made for successful psychoanalysis, but not for successful art (Tytell, 1979:29). Ginsberg's *Howl and other poems* was called "a dreadful little volume" with an "utter lack of decorum" (Hollander, 1984:26), while Burroughs' *Naked lunch* and Kerouac's *On the road* received even more negative responses.<sup>11</sup> George and Starr (1985:206) point out that the initial overwhelmingly

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<sup>11</sup> For further examples of extremely negative (and highly influential) reviews, see Hollander (1984:26-28), Podhoretz (1984:34-35) and Rumaker (1984:36-40), all examples of reviews published in the 1950s.

negative response was due to the dominance of the New Critical literary school, with its simultaneous emphasis on moral soundness and elegant form. The Beats' experimental forms and explicit exploration of extremes of experience, without any moral strings attached, obviously presented an enormous threat to the literary establishment of the time.<sup>12</sup>

The media of the time were quick to grasp the opportunity of bringing the latest trend to the attention of their readers, and summarised, simplified and processed the raw creative and social power of the Beat writers into more manageable forms, ready for consumption by middle class America (Schönfelder, 1985:391). This process had double edged results. On the one hand, it extended the influence and relevance of the Beat writers to a much wider audience, and gradually the label a small group of writers chose to express their common artistic and social vision became a term appropriated by and applied to a whole generation, who identified strongly with the bohemian lifestyle, rebelliousness and spiritual quest of the Beat writers. On the other hand, the original meaning and implications of beatness were quickly diluted until eventually nothing but a stereotype remained – a stereotype that was increasingly regarded as definitive of an entire generation (Hayward, 1991).

The Beat movement was thus initiated by the artistic project of a small group of writers that expressed their dissatisfaction with materialistic America, their experience of the underbelly of American life and their quest for true spirituality. In so doing, they (inadvertently) became the voices of a post-war generation longing for change. It is not clear whether the Beat writers should be regarded as the initiators of change, or if they were simply the ones finding the appropriate voice to articulate the changes experienced by their generation. Whatever the case, they became catalysts in the development of the Beat movement, capturing the imagination of rebellious young people and propelling them forward in their insurrection against the conservatism of their era.

The dual nature of the Beat movement as literary and social phenomenon often leads to confusion with regard to the main figures of the movement. For the purposes of this dissertation, attention will only be paid to the key literary figures –

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<sup>12</sup> The influence of the New Critics (in coalition with the high modernists) and the Beats' response to this will be discussed in more detail in section 3.2.

although some sociological aspects will be mentioned when relevant. However, even when simply referring to the Beat **writers**, it is problematic to determine who might reasonably be seen to belong to this group, especially since the influence of the Beat writers became widely disseminated and attracted many other writers. The following section will deal with this issue.

### 2.2.2 Who are the Beats?

We saw that the art of poetry was essentially dead – killed by war, by academies, by neglect, by lack of love, and by disinterest. We knew we could bring it back to life. –  
*Michael McClure* –

By the strictest definition, the Beat Generation as a literary group only consists of William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, with the possible inclusion of Gregory Corso. However, Watson (1995:5) points out that the term is often used in a much wider literary sense, including (apart from the above writers) most of the innovative poets associated with the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance of the 1950s as well as the Black Mountain College poets who eventually settled in San Francisco. In this usage, the term refers to “a range of experimental or innovative poets and novelists with little else in common except a general resistance to academic poetry and to conservative values and politics in America during the 1950s” (Foster, 1992:3).

As such, it is often used to refer to writers such as Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, William Everson (Brother Antoninus), Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia, Philip Whalen, Robert Creeley, Bob Kaufman, and later, Diane DiPrima, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Ed Sanders, Clark Coolidge and Anne Waldman – and even artists like Bob Dylan<sup>13</sup>. Several problems arise with this usage of the term *Beat writers*. Most importantly, the conflation of the Beats and other

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<sup>13</sup> Many critics, like Holmes (1981:12), point out the influence of Beat poetry on modern folk and rock lyrics, such as in the work of Bob Dylan and the Beatles. Many other contemporary artists have also acknowledged the influence, in particular from Ginsberg's poetry. These artists include, amongst others, Marianne Faithfull, Robert Hunter (of the cult group Grateful Dead), Lou Reed, Bono (from U2) and Patti Smith (see Burroughs *et al.*, 1997). The following comment by Reed, in this article, sums up Ginsberg's influence most succinctly: “His poetry was so American and so straightforward, so astute and he had such a recognizable voice. Modern rock lyrics would be inconceivable without the work of Allen Ginsberg.”

innovative writers associated with the San Francisco avant-garde scene – which is largely the result of the media hype of the times – is inaccurate and deceptive. As Charters (1993:581) points out, the Beats and the San Francisco poets were part of two different literary movements created by two loosely associated groups of writers, originating respectively from New York and San Francisco, both of which first gained a national audience during the 1950s. The conflation of the two movements may be ascribed to the facts that Ginsberg and Kerouac became famous and notorious at a time when they were (temporarily) highly involved with the avant-garde scene in San Francisco, became friends with most of its major writers, shared many of their beliefs and assumptions, were published by a publisher committed to the avant-garde writers of the area (Ferlinghetti's famous *City Lights Books*), and fought most of their notorious censorship battles in the courts of that city. The media hype of the time wanted to simplify matters for the middlebrow American reader, and since *beat* seemed an apt description of the bohemian poets, they simply applied it to any of the innovative and experimental writers who were part of the bohemian scene in that city. Literary critics were quick to follow suit and some contemporary critics still follow this convention (see for example Stephenson, 1990).

Nevertheless, other critics are aware that most of the major poets of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance have made it clear that the Beat movement and the San Francisco Renaissance developed largely separately and should be regarded as such – despite the definite and acknowledged association, similarity, and mutual influence between the two groups. Gary Snyder, for example, makes clear that

[t]he term Beat is better used for a smaller group of writers ... the immediate group around Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, plus Gregory Corso and a few others. Many of us ... belong together in the category of the San Francisco Renaissance. Both categories fall within, it seems to me, a definable time frame. It would be from sometime in the early fifties up until the mid-sixties when jazz was replaced by rock and roll and marijuana by LSD and a whole new generation jumped on board and the name beatnik changed to hippy. Still, beat can also be defined as a particular state of mind ... and I was in that mind for a while. Even the state of mind belongs to that historic window (quoted in Charters, 1993:581-582).

If one decides to use the term in its wider sense despite all of the above complications, a further problem surfaces: the term loses its specificity and becomes too generalised to function as an effective indicator of a specific movement. In this

case it functions as a reference to a sociological phenomenon defined by a state of mind, in which case it may refer not only to the original Beats, the San Francisco poets with whom they were associated, but also to succeeding generations of writers and audiences during the 1960s and 1970s – even up to the present day.

In this dissertation, the term *Beat writers* will therefore be used in its narrowest sense to refer to the Beat movement formed in the 1940s in New York through the friendship and shared literary and political ambitions of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, as well as those figures on the periphery of the circle that influenced and inspired them. The Beat identity has to do with literary aesthetics and social and political vision, but to an equal extent with the core groups' collective biography, because the development of their aesthetic and socio-political beliefs was so entwined with their everyday experiences and also with their emotional, social and literary interaction – to the extent that “[t]he lives, the legend and the literature begin to fuse” (Watson, 1995:6).

Having established the basic nature of the Beat movement and determined its main players, it is necessary to turn to the context in which it developed, since aesthetic development and change never takes place in a vacuum, but is always related to socio-political circumstances, and more importantly, a desire for change in those circumstances.

### **2.2.3 The social context: culture and counterculture in post-war America**

In the U. S. you have to be a deviant or die of boredom. – *William S. Burroughs* –

By a generation I mean that reaction against the fathers which seems to occur about three times in a century. It is distinguished by a set of ideas, inherited in moderated form from the madmen and outlaws of the generation before; if it is a real generation it has its own leaders and spokesmen, and it draws into its orbit those born just before it and just after, whose ideas are less clear cut and defiant. – *F. Scott Fitzgerald* –

Kerouac saw the origins of the Beat Generation as related to the time of the frontier in American history, when “America was invested with wild, self-believing individuality” (quoted in Foster, 1992:7). However, in post-war America there seemed

to be no place for this. Instead, the American dream had been warped into an ideal that was conformist, respectable, bureaucratized, sanitised, domesticated, depersonalised, conventionalised and drained of any emotional expression (Foster, 1992:8). World War II itself, during which the Beats and their generation came to maturity, was a determining influence, since it represented the "culmination of all the negative forces of Western civilization in a final, desperate state of ultimate terror and destructiveness" (Stephenson, 1990:173). Holmes (1952) describes the social background of the war and its influence on the Beat writers as follows:

Brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression, weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war, they distrust collectivity ... The fancies of their childhood inhabited the half-light of Munich, the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the eventual blackout. Their adolescence was spent in a topsy-turvy world of war bonds, swing shifts and troop movements. They grew to independent mind on beachheads, in gin mills and USO's, in past-midnight arrivals and pre-dawn departures ... At the four trembling corners of the world, or in the home town invaded by factories or lonely servicemen, they had intimate experience with the nadir and the zenith of human conduct, and little time for much that came between. The peace they inherited was only as secure as the next headline. It was a cold peace. Their own lust for freedom, and the ability to live at a pace that kills (to which the war had adjusted them), led to black markets, bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, hucksterism, and Jean-Paul Sartre. The beatness set in later.

As the so-called Lost Generation of the 1920s reacted against the disillusionment of World War I, the Beats' bohemianism was a reaction to their experience of World War II and its ultimate effect on American culture. Like the more radical wing of the Lost Generation, the Beats experimented with drugs and sex, and pursued extremes of experience (Stephenson, 1990:5). However, there is an important difference. For the Beats, the absence of personal and social values was no revelation, as to the Lost Generation, but a daily given, demanding a day-to-day solution:

...unlike the Lost Generation, which was occupied with the loss of faith, the Beat Generation is becoming more and more occupied with the need for it. As such, it is a disturbing illustration of Voltaire's reliable old joke: 'If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him' (Holmes, 1952).

Stephenson (1990:4-5) also points to this distinction when saying that, despite the similarities between the Beats and the Lost Generation, the "principal difference

between the Lost Generation and the Beats is the latter's intense interest in metaphysical issues – in mysticism and spirituality".<sup>14</sup>

The post-war era in America was a time of extraordinary insecurity, in which the ideals of individual responsibility, effort and achievement were abdicated in favour of corporate conformity and efficiency (Tytell, 1976:5). There was a move towards a closed, bureaucratic society, in which decisions and responsibility were removed from the individual sphere and assigned to a faceless mass. The influence of the media as a means of shaping conformism became more pronounced. American culture became increasingly obsessed with the development of science and technology as the only effective means of self-preservation, while the potential annihilating power of scientific progression created terror in the minds of everyone who had witnessed the phenomenal mass destruction of the nuclear bomb (Stephenson, 1990:175). Increasing importance was assigned to military power, supposedly to counteract the threat of communism (George & Starr, 1985:190). This created an atmosphere of coercion and conspiracy, a move towards similitude and conformism, and an intolerance of any difference from the standard. Ginsberg, in his 1966 *Paris Review* interview described the Beats' perception of the effects of the above as follows:

... the whole cold war is the imposition of a vast mental barrier on everybody, a vast antinatural psyche. A hardening, a shutting off of the perception of desire and tenderness which everybody knows and which is the very structure of ... the atom! Structure of the human body and organism. That desire built in. Blocked ... This consciousness pushed back into the self and thinking how it will hold its face and eyes and hands in order to make a mask to hide the flow that is going on. Which it's aware of, which everybody is aware of really! So let's say, shyness. Fear. Fear of like total feeling, really, total being, is what it is (in Clark, 1970:155).

The Beats reacted against this diminishment of human potential and freedom, the increasing systematisation and technologisation of life and the constriction of consciousness to insipid materialistic concerns (Stephenson, 1990:175 and Schönfelder, 1985:376). They were also concerned with the alienation of humans from the important resources of spirituality and myth (Stephenson, 1990:177). Their reaction against the dominant cultural trends in post-war America developed

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<sup>14</sup> This aspect will be discussed in more detail in section 2.2.4.4.

primarily because of the effects described above, and in doing so, they took over the banner of counterculturalism (Charters, 1993:589 and Watson, 1995:6).

Countercultural movements are those movements which balance and oppose the majority, the norm, the middle class of any time, which embody the era's standards of behaviour and thought. Such movements contain the "majority's complement, those on the margins: the rebels, the non-conformists, the outsiders" (Hayward, 1991).

Countercultural movements are therefore also related to the notion of the avant-garde, and the Beats were indeed an instance of the return of the avant-garde sensibility (Russell, 1985:242). According to Russell (1985:4), the avant-garde functions according to four basic premises. Firstly, it perceives itself to be part of a modern culture subject to constant socio-historical change. Secondly, the avant-garde adopts an explicitly critical attitude towards the values of the dominant culture. The avant-garde thirdly also embodies a desire to create a new interaction between art and society, and often allies itself with other progressive or revolutionary forces to transform society. Lastly, the avant-garde explores through artistic innovation the possibilities of creating new art forms which will in turn contribute to the creation of new modes of perception, expression and action. It should be quite apparent that the Beat movement as part of the countercultural current in America is based on these assumptions, and that it thus may be seen as an instance of a revival of the avant-garde in both the aesthetic and social dimension.<sup>15</sup>

The Beat Generation is one example of this "Bohemian dialectic" (Hayward, 1991). The radical and bohemian aspect of the Beat Generation may be traced back to the tradition of countercultural movements in both sociological and literary history (see George & Starr, 1985). The Beats' literary rebellion was equalled by their social rebellion, and to this end, they took over and developed a strain of bohemianism and radicalism from the generation preceding them in the form of hipsterism. In Norman Mailer's definition, the hipster set out

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<sup>15</sup> See section 2.4.4 for a discussion of the re-establishment of the avant-garde in post-war America, which is also linked to the origins of postmodernism.

to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat, where he must gamble with his energies through all those small or large crises of courage and unforeseen situations which beset his day, where he must be with it or doomed not to swing (quoted in Foster, 1992:5-6).

Hipsterism was essentially a rebellion against the bureaucratic, conformist and closed mainstream culture of the time (Tytell, 1979:20). It was an urban phenomenon and exclusively part of the underside of American life, involved with excessive and unstable lifestyles embracing drugs, crime, violence, jazz, blues, and sexual experimentation as means of asserting personal freedom and exploring desire (Holmes, 1981:7; Stephenson, 1990:5 and George & Starr, 1985:191). The Beats took over many of the traits of hipsterism, and idolised certain figures which they saw as representative of the "wild, self-believing individuality" they ardently believed in – most notably Neal Cassady (Foster, 1992:11). This extreme affirmation of life in the face of a stultifying society was also the project of the Beat writers, and in this project they assimilated many of the traits and interests of hipsterism in a literary mode, in particular its "spirit of unconventionality and of romantic egoism, an antimaterialist ethic, a sense of the inherent repressiveness and regimentation of society, and of the sterility and corruption of civilization, together with a faith in the redeeming, transforming power of art" (Stephenson, 1990:6).

As with many other avant-garde movements, the Beat movement became widely disseminated due to media hype, eventually developing into a deprecating stereotype of "a species of avant garde camp follower who invariably wore a black beret, goatee, and black jeans (if male) or black tights (if female), played bongo drums, drank cheap Chianti, and smoked marijuana" (Watson, 1995:4). The term *beatnik* was coined (in analogy to *sputnik*) and became associated with the caricatured description given above. After their fame the Beat movement fell victim to faddish commercialisation in the form of B-grade movies, television series and advertisements – something which none of them desired or foresaw. As in the case of the modernist avant-garde, the Beat avant-garde became absorbed by the mainstream culture (Hayward, 1991 and Calinescu, 1987a:121).<sup>16</sup> However, by the

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<sup>16</sup> See section 2.3.4 for a discussion of the assimilation of the modernist avant-garde.

1960s their bohemian and radical ideas were carried over to succeeding generations like the hippies of the 1960s and the punks of the 1970s and early 1980s, so that the Beats became the antecedents to a whole new strain of the Bohemian dialectic (Stephenson, 1990:13; Charters, 1993:582 and Watson, 1995:6).

#### 2.2.4 The general characteristics of Beat writing

To go ahead. To be of essential use. The breathing of the man. One perception leading directly to a further perception. Spontaneous prose. First thought best thought. Literature made by the whole man, writing. Rather remain silent than cheat the language. – *Charles Olson* –

As far as the content of Beat writing is concerned, the dominant characteristics may be regarded as different aspects of the movement's main purpose of rebellion. Charters (1993:582) regards the Beats' "rebellious questioning of conventional American cultural values during the cold war" as the single most important thematic characteristic of their writing, a concern which also manifests itself in the structural characteristics thereof. As already pointed out, the Beats rebelled against their country's social conformity, political repression and prevailing materialism. Instead, they strove to replace social conformity with a belief in the **sanctity of the individual** experience, repression with **spontaneity** and **freedom** of experience and expression (Charters, 1993:587), and materialism with a **spirituality** that would encompass the whole existence. All of these general aims and beliefs necessarily had several consequences in terms of both the content and the style of Beat writing.

The following sections will discuss these general characteristics, with the aim not only of providing an overview of the nature of Beat writing, but also to facilitate the objective of placing Beat poetry within the development from modernism to postmodernism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Two aspects need to be kept in mind as far as this discussion is concerned. Firstly, the discussion here makes no differentiation between characteristics relevant to prose and to poetry, but rather focuses on the **general** characteristics of Beat writing. Secondly, the characteristics mentioned here are very much interrelated, and therefore there may be some overlap between sections.

### 2.2.4.1 Spontaneity

No time for poetry but exactly what is. – *Jack Kerouac* –

Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better. – *Jack Kerouac* –

One of the most important projects of the Beat writers was to create a spontaneous creative style, an “aesthetic of unguarded, untrammelled expression” (Stephenson, 1990:14), largely in reaction to the objective and carefully constructed style of late-modernist writing. Kerouac was the main influence in this project, the aims of which he set out in two accounts: ‘Essentials of spontaneous prose’ and ‘Belief and technique of modern prose’, both of which are regarded as the definitive aesthetic of Beat writing (Charters, 1993:593). In the former he states the basic idea of spontaneous prose as

not “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash) – Blow as deep as you want – write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own individual mind (Kerouac, 1995b:484).

Elsewhere he writes:

If possible write “without consciousness” in semi-trance ... allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so “modern” language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramped, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm ... (Kerouac, 1995b:485.)

Ginsberg, in particular, was influenced by these ideas, and has acknowledged his debt to what he has called Kerouac’s “spontaneous bop prosody” (Clark, 1970:131-132). Everson (1981:181) links this style of writing to a re-emergence of a Dionysian spirit, characterised by “primordial orgiastic mystery”. According to him, the art form principally associated with Dionysus is dithyrambic verse – a “wild poetry of spontaneous enthusiasm” (Everson, 1981:181) – a tendency which is particularly obvious in Ginsberg’s poetry. Stephenson (1990:173) links the spontaneous and

improvisatory character of Beat poetry to the primitivist strain in their writing, which affirms instinct, feeling, energy, the unconscious, and nonrational modes of intelligence and perception. Another tendency related to this characteristic is the fact that poetry became increasingly grounded in the details of everyday life (Charters, 1993:586), exploring commonplace, personal experiences and their significance, rather than intellectual or scholarly issues.

As far as the Beats' concern with spontaneity of experience and expression is concerned, the influence of improvisational jazz or bebop is crucial (George & Starr, 1985:204-205; Holmes, 1981:11 and Stephenson, 1990:5). Bebop is one of the main influences transmitted to the Beats through hipsterism, and was popularised in the underground culture by musicians such as Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Parker and Thelcnious Monk. The Beats were attracted to jazz because it was a music of protest (George & Starr, 1985:205), but also because of its spontaneous and intense nature. This style of music had an immense influence on the writing styles of Kerouac and Ginsberg in terms of improvisational technique and spontaneity and intensity of expression. As Tytell, (1979:22) points out, the Beats were attracted to the capacity of jazz to "invent endless variations on themes, countless combinations and new permutations of sound which signalled a return to the unconscious, the irrational and intuitive without any goal of permanence".

The same aim of absolute spontaneity, without the imposition of any external structure, underlies the Beat writers' experimentation with consciousness-altering substances and automatic writing, which would assist in writing "what you want bottomless from the bottom of the mind" (Kerouac, 1995a:483).

Holmes (1981:11) also regards the quality of spontaneity as a major characteristic of Beat writing:

One perception leading directly to a further perception, without the deadening losses that result from beaver-logic building dams against the flow. Instead, keep the mind and sense connected, and let them go. Then the movement will be natural, the way the consciousness actually works ...

He then continues to link this desire with certain of the structural characteristics of Beat writing. Firstly, he regards the almost surreal juxtaposition and linking of images

(in themselves idiosyncratic) as typical of this kind of mind-flow poetry, which aims to recreate the associative chain of the poet's thought, while at the same time initiating a new associative chain in the mind of the reader. Kerouac (1995a:483) makes this idea clear when he lists the following as one of the essentials of spontaneous prose: "Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind." Similarly, the rhythm of Beat poetry is best described as organically related to the train of sensations, experiences and thoughts, "growing as natural things grow at the behest of their nature" (Holmes, 1981:11). This creates a kind of organic rhythm, a rhythm "seen as the instantaneous concatenation of blood-pulse, heartbeat, and eye-ear apprehension of the whole movement" (Holmes, 1981:11). This same organic approach may be regarded as the key to the form of Beat poetry. For the Beats, form had to be a natural consequence and part of the overall feel, movement and content of the writing, not something imposed externally on material. Holmes (1981:7) describes this idea in terms of the formal questions that the Beat writers asked:

What did a sonnet really have to do with Hiroshima, Charlie Parker upheavings in the spirit? Could you structure an account of cross-the-country-on-your-thumb by the old mechanical psychologies? Was poetic form simply an overlay you scissored the raw edges of content to fit? Could 17th century meter and rhyme contain the syncopated accelerations of the actual reality of blaring radios and jackhammers and pavement-crowds and bomb-reverberations? Was John Donne the most reliable guide to post-midnight, cold-water-flat illuminations? How write about real death, under the bitter bridges, in the accents of madrigal? Was art no more than an afternoon teacup, after all? (Holmes, 1981:7.)

Thus, striving after a spontaneous writing style, the Beats embraced unregulated and unconventional forms in their writing, resulting in a free poetic form, with natural thought or speech rhythms and little conventional rhyme. Charters (1993:586) points out the fact that the Beats, like Whitman and Williams, attempted in their poetry to return to a genuine and spontaneous American speech (Holmes, 1981:9), in which the above developments were of crucial importance.

Another result of the emphasis on spontaneity is the heavy emphasis on subjective and highly personal writing (Schönfelder, 1985:383). This aspect will be discussed subsequently.

### 2.2.4.2 The sanctity of individual experience

The unspeakable visions of the individual. – *Jack Kerouac* –

Stephenson (1990:15) points out that “[t]he Beats wrote directly out of personal perception and imagination”, and that their writing was created “out of real pain and hope, out of absolute personal necessity”. Similarly, Tytell (1976:15) identifies one of the major characteristics of Beat writing as their ideal of “making personality the center and subject of their work”. Very often, the Beats attempted to break down the distinction between the frank content of personal conversation between friends and the formality of conventional literary subject matter (George & Starr, 1985:204 and Schönfelder, 1985:383). As Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:135) has said, the aim is to dissolve the distinction between “what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse”. In one sense, this was a direct reaction against the ideal of impersonality and objectivity of the modernist legacy of Eliot and Pound. In another, wider sense, this aspect of their writing can be traced back to their conflict with contemporary American civilisation – and Western civilisation as a whole – which they regarded as warped and sterile, partly because of the emphasis on collectivity, conformity, materialism, and conservatism (Charters, 1993:582). Like Whitman, and the American transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, they regarded the individual experience and spirituality as the only thing that might possibly give some meaning to existence in a sterile and numbing society (Tytell, 1979:4). Their literature is thus “characteristic of the Beat desire **to be**, affirming existence as a positive value in a time of apathy” (Tytell, 1979:19).

For this reason, their lives and literature were equally devoted to the exploration of the individual experience. In this exploration, Stephenson (1990:8) identifies an important theme, which he calls “the downward quest for identity and vision, the beat-beatific movement, the journey through night to daybreak”. This includes the pervasive concern with themes of criminality, obscenity and madness in Beat writing. The violation of taboos in the experience and representation of such themes cannot be seen as mere acts of rebellion against the prevailing social order (although this is certainly part of it), but must also be seen as an assertion of individual freedom, an expression of the need to explore all dimensions of the psyche, including the destructive aspects, and to transform this into personal and spiritual growth and creative energy. In this regard Stephenson (1990:9) points out that

[c]riminality, obscenity and madness were, for the Beats, a necessary phase of personal, artistic, and spiritual development; and ultimately, these represented a mode of opposing the organized and collective criminality, the obscenity and madness of war, and the other social forms of human destructiveness.

Tytell (1976:11) also points to the theme of madness, and connects it with the following statement by the Christian mystic Thomas Merton:

We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the **sane** ones who are the most dangerous.

The Beats' "madness" is intended to show how the "sane" society has betrayed the ideals set out above, so that sanity becomes associated with destructiveness, while madness becomes a reaffirmation of the qualities of justice, humanity, love and understanding.

Another way of interpreting this is to regard the Beat struggle as an effort to liberate the creative – and destructive power – of the individual unconscious from the stultifying constraints of the societal superego. They wanted to cultivate the "energies of the body and the instincts, of the unconscious and the spirit" (Stephenson, 1990:8) and accommodate in literature the "deep regions of the psyche" and "the latent powers and potentialities of the self" (Stephenson, 1990:9). Everson (1981:182) also points out this tendency, although in more mythical terms. He regards the Beat project as an attempt to liberate the dark, ecstatic mythical power of the Dionysian tendency (associated with the unconscious) from the suppression of the Apollonian attitude, associated with "light and consciousness ... civilization and culture, education, commerce and civic virtue" which places a high premium on "rational consciousness and ego-integrity" (Everson, 1981:182). Stephenson (1990:173) also regards this aspect in mythical terms, and links it to the primitivist tendency in Beat writing, which wishes to recover the mythopoetic sensibility through rediscovering "with their own minds and spirits the same source of motive power and creative energy that animated primal art". The Beats' emphasis on nonrational modes of thought, and the importance they attached to dreams and visions is also a crucial factor in this respect.

However, the concern with subjective experience does not remain localised in the personal, but is extended to the universal. As Tytell (1979:18) puts it, the movement in Beat poetry is "from an intense assertion of personal identity to a merger with larger forces in the universe". Ginsberg (quoted in Foster, 1992:18) has stated that "poetry is the record of individual insights into the secret soul of the individual – and, because all individuals are one in the eyes of their Creator, into the soul of the World". For this reason, the Beats believed that the most personal and most ordinary experience had a universal character, and that "the way to the universal was by means of the most intensely personal" (Michael McClure, quoted in Foster, 1992:2).

Such poetry is generally antiformalist, in the sense that it does not see form in a traditional, rigid sense. Rather, the aim is to intuitively find a rhythm and language inherent to the self and its personal expression, to create "a new idiom of consciousness" (Stephenson, 1990:173). Kerouac's belief that "something that you feel will find its own form" (quoted in Tytell, 1979:20) clearly expresses this assumption. Such a form avoids rationalism (George & Starr, 1985:204) and relies on improvisation and spontaneity. Ginsberg's view on the subject expresses it most succinctly:

The poetry generally is like a rhythmic articulation of feeling ... It's a feeling that begins somewhere in the pit of the stomach and rises up forward in the breast and then comes out through the mouth and ears, and comes forth in a croon or a groan or a sigh ... Or actually what happens is ... there's a definite body rhythm that has no definite words ... And then, in writing it down, it's simply by a process of association that I find what the rest of the statement is ... (In Clark, 1970:136-137.)

Another characteristic linked to the emphasis on subjectivity is the importance attached to the actual voice of the poet and the consequent development of poetry as oral performance (Hayward, 1991).

All of this creates a poetry characterised by the honesty of raw emotion, naked confession and personal vision, embodied in organic, intrinsic and improvisatory forms. As Stephenson (1990:11) puts it, the Beats

did not seek to dissemble or disguise their personal anguish in the contrivances and artifices of technique and craft but strove to bare their hearts, to give spontaneous and honest expression to their deepest tensions and visions. Raw and unrefined, occasionally naive, even crude: there is a liberating, elemental vitality at the core of

Beat writing in contrast to which much of the mainstream literature of the period seems affected ...

### 2.2.4.3 Freedom of experience and expression

No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language and knowledge. – *Jack Kerouac* –

The Beats' emphasis on freedom of experience and expression has already been dealt with partially in previous sections. It is primarily the result of their reaction against a conformist and stultifying society, as well as their need for the free expression of personal experience. This rebellion against society and the assertion of the freedom of the individual lie at the core of Beat writing.

This aspect of their lives and writing explains the Beats' involvement with the underground and criminal aspects of American life, as well as their desire to express these experiences. On the level of content, this explains the Beats' description of the lifestyle of the counterculture, incorporating aspects often regarded as taboo. For example, most of the Beat writers experimented with various kinds of sexual relationships, and many of them, including Ginsberg, were openly homosexual and wrote explicitly and in a celebratory manner of the nature of this sexual orientation (see Pinckney, 1982 and Stimpson, 1982/83). In this, the influence of Whitman is of course also crucial, as Docherty (1993:201) points out, since both Whitman and Ginsberg's work constitutes an "open celebration of physicality and homosexuality". However, conservative American culture regarded homosexuality (at best) as a "criminal perversion" (Tytell, 1979:10), and denounced the Beats' attempts to speak freely about homosexual love as obscene. But the Beats regarded "an unfettered, uncensored sexuality as a good in itself and as an index of an unfettered, uncensored, regenerative life" and often valorised "the homosexual as a rebel who seizes freedom and proclaims the legitimacy of individual desire" (Stimpson, 1982/83:374-375). The Beats depicted all variations on the theme of sex with candour, honesty, energy, and rage, to assert the freedom of the individual, and celebrate the joy in an experience of variety and experimentalism.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Beats' contribution to the liberation of homosexuality is a topic in itself, and will not be discussed here in any further detail. However, the Beats' explicit treatment of homosexuality in their writing points to the high value that they placed on the freedom to live as one desires, and the freedom to write about

Similarly, the Beats' extensive experimentation with drugs "set a model of life free from conventional expectations" (Tytell, 1979:23). The insistence to freely speak in literature about all aspects of their lives, including their experiences with sex, drugs and crime, is a direct result of the belief in the freedom of experience and expression. Of course, this led to much conflict with censorship laws, and allegations of obscenity, which eventually resulted in several censorship trials, particularly around Ginsberg's *Howl and other poems* and Burroughs' novel *Naked lunch*.<sup>19</sup>

On the formal level, Beat writing displays the writers' insistence on personal freedom in many aspects. Basically, it entails the freedom to break with conventions of literary form, invent new forms and experiment freely with formal aspects. Everson (1981:191) regards the Beats' rejection of formalism as central to their poetry. He describes formalism as "the codification of the precisionism of the past" (Everson, 1981:191), and argues that once this kind of codification takes place, avant-garde poetics feels the need to overthrow it, often through a combination of neo-precisionist avant-garde and Dionysian ecstatic poetry. Kerouac's rambling picaresque narratives, Burroughs' cut-up and fold-in techniques and Ginsberg's experimentations with free incantatory verse are all aspects that one might mention as ways of breaking with the conventions of literary form (Stephenson, 1990:10).

Furthermore, their notion of freedom also needs to be considered in terms of its spiritual aspect. All of these techniques are attempts to regenerate the spiritual nature of the word, restoring the word as "magico-religious force" (Stephenson, 1990:185) so that their literature might be a way of countering the negativity of their time with positive, individual spirituality (Prothero, 1991:220).

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it. It must also be kept in mind that the Beat writers, in particular Ginsberg and Burroughs, have very different approaches to the whole issue, with Burroughs' being the more sardonic and cruelly ironic of the two (Stimpson, 1982/83:383), thus developing healthily different perspectives on homosexuality. Another interesting point is the fact that the Beat literary movement was dominated by men, and the relationships between men. In the Beat movement, women were most often peripheral figures (Watson, 1995:22), whose importance was negligible in comparison with the intense relationships between the men. This focus on male bonds (Stimpson, 1982/83:375) creates a definite link with the English Romantic movement, which was similarly characterised by an exaltation of male friendship.

<sup>19</sup> For accounts of these trials, and their impact, see George and Starr (1985:207) and particularly Ferlinghetti (1984).

Overall, the notion of freedom expresses itself on the formal level in the experimental nature of Beat writing (Charters, 1993:583), and is also related to the spontaneous and highly individual character thereof. As Stephenson, 1990:14-15) points out, the Beats' desire for freedom of expression is manifested in many ways, including "their aesthetic of unguarded, untrammelled expression; their emphasis on the personal universal; their insistence on feeling and emotion; and their resolutely antiformalist, antielitistic stance". All of these attributes were in direct conflict with the accepted tradition of literary expression in their time, and represent a radical break with the norm in favour of a freer notion of expression.

#### 2.2.4.4 Spirituality

Every time I open my big mouth  
I put my soul into it – *Bob Kaufman* –

Prothero (1991) views the whole Beat movement as essentially a spiritual protest. According to George and Starr (1985:197), the Beats regarded the essential problem of their time as a spiritual problem, an aspect also pointed out by Everson (1981:182), who describes the Beat project as an attempt to "incorporate genuine ecstatic and mystical needs" into everyday existence. The Beats felt that conventional, materialistic society stultified individual spirituality, and furthermore that conventional Western religion was similarly deadening:

Like the transcendentalists who inspired them, the Beats were critics of "corpse-cold" orthodoxies; they were champions of spiritual experience over theological formulations who responded to the challenge of religious pluralism by conjuring out of inherited and imported materials a wholly new religious vision. (Prothero, 1991:220.)

They returned to the shamanistic-prophetic role of the artist in society (Stephenson, 1990:15), in which the artist is equated with the shaman of tribal societies. The shaman functions as "a healer and seer, the bearer of the mysteries and the myth giver – at once preserving the ancient connections between the human world and the realm of the supernatural and the sacred and at the same time giving expression to the necessary communal myths of the time" (Stephenson, 1990:179).

The use of vision-inducing drugs and the cultivation of oneiric, ecstatic and trance states constitute other ways in which the Beats were involved in the shamanistic tradition. Also, the Beats ascribed to the intricate relationship between the artist-shaman and his community, regarding the task of the artist as the regeneration of the life of the community (Stephenson, 1990:180).<sup>20</sup>

The Beats were also particularly attracted to Oriental, primitive and mystical religions (Stephenson, 1990:14 and Pinckney, 1982:102). As Prothero (1991:216) and Portugés (1984b:143) point out, in addition to the mystical Catholicism of Kerouac, the Protestantism of Burroughs and the Judaism of Ginsberg, the Beats studied various spiritual approaches such as gnosticism, mysticism, native American lore, Aztec and Mayan mythology, Egyptian astrology, American transcendentalism, Hinduism and especially Buddhism. The interest in the primitive is particularly strong, since the Beats saw in it a reaffirmation of the powers of instinct, feeling, and the unconscious by which they could recover the mythopoetic sensibility<sup>21</sup>, together with a sense of magic and ritual (Stephenson, 1990:172). In this, the nonrational approach of the Beats again becomes evident (Watson, 1995:6).

Despite the influence of personal mythologies and interests, both Kerouac and Ginsberg (and many other contemporary poets) turned to Buddhism<sup>22</sup> to find a "means of deconditioning themselves from Western habits of mind and feeling, and a way out of the morass of Self into which they had so angrily plunged" (Tytell, 1979:25; see also Prothero, 1991:217-222). Furthermore, many aspects of Buddhism appealed to the Beats' own views and ideals (Stephenson, 1990:13). This lead to a rather eclectic and inconsistent appropriation of Buddhist practices. For

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<sup>20</sup> Ostriker (1982) presents an extensive discussion of the relationship between Ginsberg's poetry and the shamanic tradition. She also links this to the mystical and prophetic nature of his poetry, and regards Blake as a major influence in this regard.

<sup>21</sup> Stephenson (1990:183) defines the mythopoetic sensibility as "a conceptual process founded upon metaphorical perception and mythic ideation". He relates this to "sacramental vision", a "mode of apprehension whereby the natural world is seen as animate, sentient, sacred, and of one essence, one being". This obviously relates to the Beats' mystical and transcendental vision, as well as their reaction against rationalism.

<sup>22</sup> Ganguly (1993) presents an interview with Allen Ginsberg, in which the influence of Buddhism and Eastern thought and experience on Ginsberg's life and his poetry is discussed extensively. A similar discussion can be found in Clark (1970:158-161).

example, the emphasis on intuition rather than rationality linked with the Beats' belief in spontaneity:

The Beats responded to the Zen principle of final authority in the individual's spontaneous and intuitive insights and actions, as well as Zen's sanctification of every moment of existence ... Zen-Buddhist "mindfulness" consists of bare attention to details – seeing what there is without commentary, interpretation, judgement or conclusion, and this appealed to the Beats as they were intent on transgressing standard morality and convention. (Tytell, 1979:27.)

The goal of Zen, to discover "a state in which all differences and separations (from man to man or man to nature) were dissolved" (Tytell, 1979:26) is a further aspect that appealed to Beat writers. They aspired to the condition where thought processes would be annihilated "so that all would appear as a flow of indistinguishable parts that would carry with it the suppression of accumulated experience. The result was a weightless catharsis beyond madness ..." (Tytell, 1979:26). Portugés (1984b:151) relates this to the Buddhist *sunyata*, the "Buddhist formula for absence of rational controlled mind ... *Sunyata* is intuitive knowledge; the practitioner is a medium for enlightened sensations".

Tantrism is another aspect which influenced the Beats. According to Faas (1984:445), Tantrism is devoted to "the worship of the Great Mother", and teaches that "self-abandonment can only be achieved through a detached, though fully sensual, acceptance of one's physical passions and desires". This focus on the body and physical experience as part of spiritual enlightenment appealed to the Beats, who aimed to reconnect the body and emotion to art, instead of espousing the detached intellectualism of high modernism. As Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:160) has put it, he increasingly felt that one had to "live in the body" since "this is the form that [one is] born for". In a different context, Alexander (1984:255) also points out this tendency: "Ginsberg's poetry embodies his effort to break through the crust of a civilization which exalts the static, rational virtues of the mind and denies the body's dynamic power to generate an imaginative alternative to the contemporary political and spiritual decay." Furthermore, Tantric practices encouraged the kind of free sexual consort that the Beats admired as an expression of individual freedom and anticonventionalism (Tytell, 1979:26).

The Beats' use of drugs was often not for purely experimental ends, since they regarded the use of consciousness-altering substances as a means of reaching what Ginsberg has, in 'Howl' (CP:126-133), described as an "ancient heavenly connection". Prothero (1991:220) points out that all of the Beats' experimentation with drugs, psychoanalysis, bisexuality, jazz, mantra chanting, Zen meditation and new literary forms must be regarded as connected attempts to "conjure the gods within".

The Beats' eclectic appropriation of Buddhist principles and other Eastern systems of belief has been a pervasive influence (George & Starr, 1985:196; Holmes, 1981:10 and Jackson, 1988). Kerouac's last writings include translations of Buddhist texts, and his later novels (like *The Dharma bums*) took on an increasingly Buddhist slant. Ginsberg's poetry has been consistently influenced by Buddhist beliefs and practices, and many of his poems are written under the influence of the haiku<sup>23</sup> (Portugés, 1984b:153 and Géfin, 1984:276-277), while others are structured around Zen breathing exercises, mantra chanting or focused on the experience of *satori* through meditation (see Ganguly, 1993:28-29 and Jackson, 1988: 51-70). Many of the other characteristics of Ginsberg's poetry can also be related to the Buddhist influence, such as the emphasis on spontaneity, the frequent inclusion of visionary experiences, the movement from the personal to the universal, and the attention to the individual perceptions of details of life as a path towards enlightenment.

This "preoccupation with the real" (Everson, 1981:185) is particularly important. The Beats' grounding of their poetry in the details of everyday life is more than mere perceptive recording, but is generally imbued with a spiritual significance. In this sense, Beat poetry shares with imagist poetry the notion of the complex physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual significance caught up in a single moment of experience – however banal.<sup>24</sup> As Holmes (1981:10) points out, the Beats' attention to the ordinary arises from a belief that "body, mind and soul are enmeshed, that corporeality is the 'field' from which spirit emanates". All of this works together to bring a new sense of spirituality to their writing, which may be regarded as rites

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<sup>23</sup> The influence of the haiku on Ginsberg's poetics will be discussed further in section 3.3.1.1.1, in relation to the juxtapositional method thereof.

<sup>24</sup> It is no coincidence that Ezra Pound, the originator of imagism, was also very much influenced by Eastern poetry, in particular the haiku, which is the poetic expression of the ideas contained in the last part of this section (see Géfin, 1984:272).

to resacralize a desacralized age, to remythicize and revitalize consciousness and perception, to redeem life from the repressive structures and destructive powers that constrain and constrict its free expression, to reestablish the primacy of intuitive intelligence, and to reawaken the vital, life-affirming impulses of the senses and the psyche (Stephenson, 1990:185).

### 2.2.5 The literary context

It has already been pointed out that the Beat movement as literary phenomenon needs to be regarded in terms of its revolt against the institutionalised poetics of high modernism and the dominance of the New Critical school of literary criticism. This aspect will be dealt with in further detail in section 3.2 of this dissertation, but it would be worthwhile to provide a brief general discussion of the Beat writers' acknowledged literary idols and opponents, from which one might already form a preliminary picture of influences which the Beats either assimilated or rejected in their writing.

The Beat writers' rejection of the objective and intellectual poetics of Eliot and the formal approach of the New Critics (Holmes, 1981:7 and Tytell, 1979:29) was balanced by their appropriation of styles more suited to their personal, spontaneous and spiritual approach, and their literary roots generally draw on traditions which encourage these qualities (Foster, 1992:14). The Beats, and particularly Ginsberg, were very much influenced by William Carlos Williams' poetics of spontaneity, simplicity, and immediacy of expression, rooted in both the everyday experience, and the everyday language of America (Holmes, 1981:6).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, there is a certain affinity with Ezra Pound's early work (Holmes, 1981:6), based on its power of simple expression.<sup>26</sup> The poetry of Walt Whitman<sup>27</sup> formed the basis of Ginsberg's long poetic line, of his social involvement and his energy in describing American life, as well as his concern with homosexual issues (Schönfelder, 1985:379 and Tytell,

<sup>25</sup> This influence is acknowledged by Ginsberg (1984b:80) and also pointed out by Simpson (1984:19), Tytell (1979:223-224) and Pinckney (1982:101).

<sup>26</sup> Pound's influence is also indicated by Stephenson (1981:4), Schönfelder (1985:379) and Géfin (1984:272) and acknowledged by Ginsberg (1986).

<sup>27</sup> The influence of Whitman is stated by almost every source consulted for this dissertation, and it is impossible to include all references here. Besides the references given in the text, Ginsberg (1984b:81), Hollander (1984:27), Rosenthal, 1984:30), Podhoretz (1984:35), Milosz (1984:269), Géfin

1979:226). Furthermore, the Beats (and particularly Ginsberg) admired William Blake<sup>28</sup> for his visionary sensibility as well as for his social involvement (Hayward, 1991; Holmes, 1981:6 and Schönfelder, 1985:379). Other literary influences mentioned by Holmes (1981:6-7), as well as Everson (1981:186-193) include (amongst others) Hart Crane, D. H. Lawrence, Arthur Rimbaud, Henry Miller and Robinson Jeffers, most of whom are renowned for their frank and personal literary approaches to sexuality. Stephenson (1990:4) and Schönfelder (1985:379) also emphasise the influence of Miller. Other influences include the work of European writers as diverse as Antonin Artaud, Jean Genet, Franz Kafka, and Feodor Dostoevsky (Schönfelder, 1985:379). Another explicit influence runs through from the American transcendentalist writers Emerson and Thoreau (Holmes, 1981:9).<sup>29</sup> Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:131) has acknowledged the influence of the poet Christopher Smart, an influence which Hunsberger (1984) discusses at length. Another influence, pointed out by Pinckney (1982:101), is that of Gertrude Stein, whose experimentation with automatic writing has been very influential in the Beats' aesthetic of spontaneity. Apart from these literary influences, there is also a very strong influence from the side of popular culture, including movies, comic books, pulp magazines, radio and jazz, which are regarded as a kind of contemporary mythology (Stephenson, 1990:15, 184).

As far as the larger context of literary movements is concerned, Holmes (1981:10), Stephenson (1990:11-12) and Tytell (1979:9) point out the similarity (and differences) with the contemporaneous existentialist movement in Europe. For example, Stephenson (1990:11) states that the Beats, like the existentialists, were concerned with the decay of Western civilisation, but that the literature of the Beats "is informed by vigour and energy, by sensuality and by spiritual aspiration", instead of the mere sense of despair and futility, negation and emptiness that pervades existentialist writing. Stephenson (1990:4) further mentions dadaism and surrealism

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(1984:273), Tallman (1984:381), and Pinckney (1982:105), amongst others, also point out the influence.

<sup>28</sup> The same is true for the phenomenal influence that Blake has had on Ginsberg's poetry. Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:147-157) has extensively discussed the influence that his mystical experiences around Blake's poetry has had on his own poetics, and this is also taken up by Tytell (1979:221), Portugés (1984a), Hunsberger (1984:158), and Heffernan (1984).

<sup>29</sup> This influence is also indicated by Tytell (1979:4), Everson (1981:190-193), Stephenson (1990:7) and Docherty (1993:200).

as important literary movements that had a great influence on Beat writing, an assumption to which Watson (1995:14) and Tytell (1979:226) also ascribe.<sup>30</sup> Stephenson (1984:386 and 1990:4) and George and Starr (1985:204-206) also point to the impact of the English Romantic movement, particularly in the work of William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley (Stephenson, 1990:7). There are also discernible links with the primitivist tradition, as embodied in the art of, for example, Gauguin, Picasso, Brancusi, Klee and Pollock (Stephenson, 1990:172). These links primarily have to do with the Beats' assertion of the importance of instinct, feeling, energy, the unconscious, and nonrational modes of intelligence and perception. The Beats' primitivism also presents a critique of urban-industrial civilization which destroys authentic human relations and spirituality, and an attempt to regain these (Stephenson, 1990:177). Watson (1995:14) believes that there is a very strong expressionist influence in Beat writing, particularly since the expressionist movement is "conventionally identified with self-expression, creativity, ecstatic fervour and a ruthless denial of tradition" (Watson, 1995:14), all qualities very similar to those of Beat writing. The same point is made by George and Starr (1985:209), who briefly discuss the link between Beat poetry and expressionist art. Ginsberg (in Clark, 1970:138-144) has acknowledged the influence of the juxtapositional technique of the French postimpressionist painter Paul Cézanne, an aspect which is extensively discussed by Portugés (1984b). Another influence explicitly acknowledged by Ginsberg (1984b:80) is that of imagism, both in the Poundian form and in the work of William Carlos Williams.

These introductory notes on the Beats' acknowledged (and more obscure) artistic influences will serve as background to section 3, which will attempt to organise all of the discussions on the influences on and characteristics of Beat poetry in terms of the development from modernism to postmodernism.

### 2.2.6 A working definition of the Beat movement

The meaning of the term *beat* as used in the terms *Beat Generation* or *Beat writing* encompasses the **dual aim** of the movement. On the one hand, *beat* may mean *beat down*, but on the other, it may also mean *beatific*. The movement as a whole

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<sup>30</sup> Other critics who point out the surrealist and dadaist influences include Simpson (1984:20) and various commentators in Ferlinghetti (1984:46-53).

embodies this duality, since it is simultaneously concerned with the terrifying and **defeating conditions of the society** of their time, and with the creation of a new **transcendental hope and individual spirituality**.

The term *beat* was appropriated by a group of friends – Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg – who were part of the avant-garde scene in New York during the late 1940s and early 1950s. From here the epithet became widely disseminated, particularly after the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance of the 1950s, with which the original Beats were associated. The mainstream media also helped to distribute a simplified version of the Beats' ideals, and eventually the term was applied to a whole generation of youths who identified strongly with the Beat ethos and lifestyle.

The Beat project developed from a dissatisfaction with the prevailing social climate in post-war America. The Beats reacted against the materialism, conformity, depersonalisation, unemotionality and lack of spirituality they perceived in the mainstream and comfortable bourgeois culture of their time. The influence of World War II led to an increasing obsession with technology and military power, and created a closed culture where secrecy and conspiracy were prevailing attributes.

Against these dominant cultural characteristics, the Beat movement became part of a bigger **countercultural movement**, taking over the excessive, unstable and **bohemian** avant-garde lifestyles of other countercultural movements such as hipsterism. In so doing, they asserted the **primacy of the individual** and his **freedom of lifestyle and expression**, they celebrated **emotion, spontaneity** and **spirituality**, and they advocated the importance of basic connections between humans, and between humans and nature. The above thematic concerns are expressed in **forms** which are **idiosyncratic, innovative** and **organically related** to the essential experience.

These characteristics are also clearly reflected in the type of literature that the Beats admired and rejected. Inevitably, they **reject styles of literature which are highly intellectualised, formalistic and traditional**, and are attracted to writers and movements espousing spontaneity, anarchy, feeling, individuality and experimentalism.

The discussion presented in this section will be used throughout this dissertation as the framework for all references to the development, nature and characteristics of the Beat movement in general and Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry in particular. The following section will construct a similar framework for the modernist movement.

## 2.3 Modernism

### 2.3.1 Introduction

The framework for modernism constructed in this section focuses on the salient features of modernist art as well as the contextual background against which it developed.<sup>31</sup> It does not attempt to give an exhaustive discussion of the possible interpretations of modernism, but is rather assembled in such a way that it might facilitate a comparison between the context and nature of modernism and the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg. It will focus on the meaning and implications of the term *modernism*, the social background of the movement, its development and nature, and the basic characteristics of modernist art.

### 2.3.2 The term *modernism*

The term *modernism* does not refer to a single unified movement in art. Rather, it is an umbrella term that includes many different movements, which – in their diversity – embrace a common spirit and principles (Calinescu, 1987a:75).<sup>32</sup> On the grounds of these commonalities in modernist art, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms *modernism* or *modernist* and the *modern*. The term *modern* may be used in two ways. Firstly, it may be used to indicate contemporaneity, which suggests that all art is modern to those who make it (see McHaney, 1992:160). In a more historical

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<sup>31</sup> The framework for modernism is particularly brief, since the movements of imagism and surrealism – and not modernism as a whole – form the main focus of attention in the application of the theory to Ginsberg's Beat poetry. Nevertheless, since it constitutes part of an attempt to place Beat poetry within developments from modernism to postmodernism, some kind of background is necessary. The discussion in this section is further supplemented by discussions in sections 3.2 and 3.3.

<sup>32</sup> However, this diversity is often overlooked, and with the progress of time one particular variety of modernism came to be regarded as definitive – so-called high modernism. This aspect will be discussed further in section 2.3.4.

sense, the modern refers to a period dating from roughly the 1860s to the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> *Modernism*, on the other hand, designates more than just a temporal phase. Rather, it indicates a specific approach to or movement within art which values certain qualities above all other, such as the quality of innovation. Therefore, *modern* art works are not necessarily *modernist* art works, although the modern time and the modernist vision are very much interrelated. Definitions of modernism vary, and like most literary-historical terms, its meanings and implications are suffused by instability and contradiction (Poirier, 1992:104). However, most definitions are based on the assumption that modernism constituted a radical cultural change, a sense of "cultural anxiety" (Poirier, 1992:104) of which the changes in the arts were just one manifestation (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:19).

Dating such an artistic and cultural change is problematic, but most critics emphasise the importance of the years surrounding World War I in the development of the modernist movement (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:33). However, radical changes in the arts had already started in the previous century in subtler forms, and therefore it seems most sensible to follow Bradbury (1989:5) in dating the modernist movement as starting from about 1870, with its culmination in the 1920s.

The end of the modernist era is similarly difficult to pinpoint, although most literary historians would put it around the beginning of World War II. Bradbury (1989:20) points out that the 1930s already posed a challenge to the central assumptions of modernism. The time of the great economic depression and the rise of fascism lead to a questioning of the relevance of (high) modernist art. It was increasingly felt that modernist art had evaded politics, history and moral responsibility, and that it had become dissociated from socio-political concerns. When the 1930s ended in World War II, the modernist movement seemed to have reached its end, but an end that became suffused in the beginnings of the succeeding movement of postmodernism. Even though postmodernism has supplanted modernism in the quest for the new, the traces of modernist innovation remain – in fact, without the modernist revolution, postmodernism would have no point of departure.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The history of the term *modern* is a long and complicated one, and cannot be discussed here. See Calinescu (1987a:13-86) for a discussion of this issue.

<sup>34</sup> See section 2.4.3 for an extensive discussion of this issue.

From the above discussion it should already be clear that the symbiosis between the development of modernism and the nature of its context is of crucial importance. This aspect will be discussed briefly in the following section.

### 2.3.3 The social perspective

Bradbury and McFarlane (1991:27) point out that "modernism is the art of modernization", and as such is a necessary response to changing times. Stephenson (1992:8) similarly states that "modernist fiction changed radically in structure and style because the world it envisaged changed radically at the time, as indeed did means of envisaging it". Pound's call to make art new then needs to be regarded and evaluated within the context of a world already making itself new.<sup>35</sup> Bradbury (1989:9) points out that the aesthetic revolution of modernism coincided with

a great transformation that had been sweeping through the ideas and arts of Europe as the new century started. The transition of one age to another, the massive burst of new invention and experiment in science and technology, philosophy and psychology, the great growth of cities, the spreading of factory processes, the coming of new means of communication like the motor-car and the telephone, the political gaps that were now opening in most Western societies, all of these things were creating an atmosphere of fracture.

The time in which artistic modernism developed was characterised by scientific and technological progress, industrial revolution, economic and social changes and the rise of capitalism (Calinescu, 1987a:41 and Brooker, 1991:154). All of these aspects fractured and displaced social expectations, scientific awareness, and religious and moral values. These changes had their roots already in the previous century. The publication of texts such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist manifesto* (1848), Charles Darwin's *The origin of species* (1859), and Sigmund Freud's *The interpretation of dreams* (1900) radically altered views on issues such as the nature

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<sup>35</sup> Making statements like these beg criticisms of oversimplification, not unlike the criticism sometimes levelled at the cruder forms of Marxist criticism. I acknowledge that the relationship between art and society is a complex one, and not as simple as the nature of art being determined by the nature of society. This is not the assumption that this section (or this dissertation) wishes to convey. Rather, it is intended to point out that there is undoubtedly some kind of relationship between art and society, and

of society, the origins of the world and of humanity, and the nature of human consciousness, respectively (Bradbury, 1989:10 and Calinescu, 1987a:59). These new secular sociological and scientific views contributed to a climate which increasingly challenged the old theocentric and romantic vision. The sociological and scientific challenges to traditional perceptions of the physical world corresponded to new views on the nature of perception, intuition and consciousness (Bradbury, 1989:11), as exemplified for example in the work of William James and Henri Bergson. All of these contributed to a greater focus – also in art – on the subjective, inner life of the individual, and fostered attempts to find new ways of presenting this fleeting, unstable internal experience (Stevenson, 1992:2).

All of these changes culminated in (and were altered by) one of the key elements in the development of modernism: World War I. The war collapsed the whole of European culture into mass destruction, causing not only physical ruin, but also the destruction of world views, beliefs and assumptions, as well as views on the nature and function of art. The grand scale bloodshed and destruction of the war came as a tremendous shock to European society, and finally demolished all Romantic and Victorian notions of benign nature and patriotism (Bradbury, 1989:16) and ultimately undermined the whole value system of Western civilization (York, 1996:483).

The modernist *Weltanschauung* is thus fundamentally based on a sense of the world being in crisis. Nietzsche described the modern period as a “fragmented, pluralistic, sick, weird period” (quoted in Bradbury, 1989:7), and cultural movements felt the need to respond to this. In the late nineteenth century this response to an already changing world made itself felt in the form of romantic decadence, symbolism and impressionism (see Scott, 1991:206-227), but the abrupt changes of industrialisation, urbanisation and technologism shifted the response away from the romantic and ephemeral. Together with World War I, this caused an increasingly fractured, dismembered, and confused perception of the world, in which traditional notions were no longer able to provide any anchorage. This vision was expressed in the changing nature of literature, since the inherited mode of ordering a work of art, which assumed a relatively coherent and secure social order, could not correspond

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that artistic movements cannot be approached separate from their historical and social contexts and their responses to these.

to “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history” (Eliot, quoted in Abrams, 1993:119).

The relationship of modernist art to all of these radical changes is rather complex. Modernist art is both a reflection of this changing social situation, and a critique of some aspects of it with which artists took issue (Calinescu, 1987a:41-42). In particular, the avant-garde origins of modernism were characterised by a rejection of the developing bourgeois culture and all its trappings. This aspect of modernism will be explored further in the following section.

### **2.3.4 The nature and development of the modernist movement**

Bradbury (1989:3) describes the modernist movement as an attempt to find

a new way through modern experience, a task of discovery and dissent, a venture through the dangerous limits of the imagination, a breaking free from the frozen structures of the past. Everything needed to change – the philosophy underlying the arts, the basic vision they expressed, the relationship between form and content, artist and audience, creative individual and society.

From this the major defining feature of modernist art can be summarised as a desire to make a radical break with the past and with patterns of thought and artistic forms that were no longer able to articulate the changing experience of the modern age (Calinescu, 1987a:5). In Pound’s famous words, the aim of the modernist movement was to “make it new!”, and as Bradbury and McFarlane (1991:19) point out, this making new was the kind of “overwhelming dislocation” that leaves “great areas of the past in ruins ... question[s] an entire civilization or culture, and stimulate[s] frenzied rebuilding”. This innovation was the result of an increasing awareness of and disillusionment with the limits of traditional thought, faith, morality and knowledge, which no longer seemed relevant to the changing age. The modernist project was therefore twofold. It was simultaneously a rejection of and revolt against traditional modes of thought and expressions, a quarrel with the cultural fragmentation of the early twentieth century, **and** a serious creative attempt to understand the nature of modern existence and to find new forms to express this understanding.

The origins of modernist art are to be found in the avant-garde<sup>36</sup>. Ezra Pound, one of the most influential figures of the movement, believed that serious art had to be in advance of its time – it had to be avant-garde (Bradbury, 1989:6). Thus modernism's severance of ties with the past also implies an involvement not only with the present, but also with the future. As already suggested, this involvement constituted both rejection and affirmation. Modernist avant-garde art rejected and revolted against

the corrupted state of contemporary bourgeois culture, the smug values of a commercial, materialistic, imperial society, the middlebrow and reassuring tradition of the arts. At the same time [it] is the modern age in its full expression, the revealer of its deepest forms and principles, the distiller of its spirit and contradictions (Bradbury, 1989:6).

The injunction to create new modes of expression lies at the core of the proliferation of avant-garde movements that made up modernism, especially in its earlier stages (Levenson, 1984:138). Bradbury (1989:14) mentions some of these movements, such as impressionism, cubism, expressionism, futurism, constructivism, acmeism, suprematism, vorticism, fauvism, surrealism, dadaism and many more.<sup>37</sup> This proliferation of movements took root in different countries, at different times, and focused on different genres, but all of them aimed to express the “wonder of the new” (Bradbury, 1989:15).

The initial proliferation of movements began to distil in the years before World War I, but it is undoubtedly the war that stands at the centre of the modernist movement (Wheale 1995:22 and Bradbury, 1989:16). The influence of the war not only changed the world and people's perception of it, it also changed the impetus of the modernist project, which could “no longer [be] a daring experiment in consciousness and new forms of expression” (Bradbury, 1989:16). Rather, it became the expression

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<sup>36</sup> According to Calinescu (1987a:95), the avant-garde is characterised by a sharp sense of militancy, praise of nonconformism and exploration of and confidence in the ability to overcome traditions that try to appear eternal, immutable and transcendental. The avant-garde's sense of radical critique is aimed at social as much as aesthetic forms (Calinescu, 1987a:112), and in both cases, it attempts to overthrow all binding traditions in favour of the freedom to explore new, previously forbidden horizons in both society and art. The essential belief is that to revolutionise art is also to revolutionise life.

<sup>37</sup> The nature and characteristics of all of these movements will not be discussed here. The movements of imagism and surrealism, identified as relevant to the study of Ginsberg's Beat poetry in terms of its relationship to modernism, will be discussed in sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.

of a sombre new condition of anarchy, fragmentation and instability (Levenson, 1984:140). Where pre-war modernism may be described as a "symbolist optimism" (Bradbury, 1989:18), modernism after the war became characterised by a sense of fragility, futility and vacancy. While pre-war modernism mainly attempted to shake cultural institutions from their lethargy, post-war modernism was faced with a radically changing cultural condition, which they now attempted to come to terms with (Levenson, 1984:14). Responses to the war varied, from the futurists who glorified war and violence, to the expressionists who revolted with individual energy against a rotten civilization. In response to the destruction of the war, modernist forms became increasingly fragmented, expressed a sense of historical decline and human fragility, and became increasingly concerned with epistemological and existential questions.

It is in the time after the war, especially in the 1920s, that modernist literature reached its culmination. In 1922 T. S. Eliot's poem *The waste land* appeared, most probably the definitive poem of the post-war modernist spirit, expressing its vision of "sterility and cultural collapse, of a universal fragmentation" (Bradbury, 1989:18). In the same year James Joyce's *Ulysses* appeared, presenting a similar view of futility, fragmentation and anarchy, with many other authors following the same direction. This vision formed not only the thematic concern of texts, but was also profoundly influential in the adaptation of form. Texts became increasingly fragmented, a result not only of the fragmentation of the world, but also of a fundamental doubt regarding the ability of words to express experience. Free verse and stream-of-consciousness are only two of the techniques developed by writers who believed that language needed to be reconstructed and re-appropriated to become reconnected to the fragmentation of the age, and similar approaches were followed in the other arts. In music, for example, atonality was an indication of the dissolution of conventions of constructions developed over centuries (Stephenson, 1992:6), and in the visual arts non-representationalism, in various forms, created the same result (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:26).

Gradually the original avant-gardism of modernism became assimilated and institutionalised into a singular structure that would retrospectively come to be perceived as a modernist tradition (Brooker, 1991:154). This later manifestation of modernism is often called high modernism (Abrams, 1993:119), and this is the form that eventually became canonised and institutionalised, particularly in American

universities during the 1940s and 1950s. Tytell (1979:29) points out the pervasiveness of the high modernist ideal in the American literary climate of post-war America, based on expectations of "a certain finesse of texture, strict formal adherence to convention, and proper taste in subject matter. They were conditioned to expect irony, self-deprecation, containment, craft; the romantic, especially any overt declaration of feeling, was suspect".

Other strains of modernism like the surrealist, expressionist or dadaist movements were never treated with quite the same veneration in the American academia of the first half of this century, and were in fact positively reviled (see Watson, 1995:18-19). It was this tradition that the Beats chose to flaunt, with their emphasis on personal subject matter, spirituality, feeling, spontaneity, and raw, untrammelled expression (Charters, 1993:587).<sup>38</sup>

The following discussion of some general characteristics of modernism should be read against the background of the above, constantly keeping in mind the difficulties of talking of modernism as if it were a unified movement. The following comments generally refer to characteristics mainly associated with high modernism, though many of these characteristics are also evident in some of the other movements included in modernism.

### 2.3.5 Some general characteristics of modernism

To distil a central assumption, approach or characteristic of modernism from the proliferation of movements which it encapsulated is virtually impossible. The different movements in modernism are widely diverse and often in conflict (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:23). In order to make sense of this proliferation of movements, Fleming (1991:525), talking of modernist visual arts, believes that the modernist project falls apart in two distinguishable groups: **expressionism** and **abstractionism**. The expressionist strain focuses on individual, inward states of consciousness, rather than on the external world. It is in this sense that it is non-representational, and tends to be more "symbolic" in its approach. The expressionist strain includes movements such as neoprimitivism, dadaism and surrealism.

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<sup>38</sup> For an extensive discussion of the characteristics of high modernism that became institutionalised in the American literary establishment of the 1950s, see section 3.2.

Abstractionism is also non-representational, but in a different sense. It is a more objective approach, and follows processes of analysis, derivation, detachment, selection, simplification and geometrisation to distil the essence from nature and sense experiences. In this way, the art work becomes its own self-defining referent, not realistically referring to something in the world "out there". Abstractionism includes movements such as cubism and futurism, and may be seen as related to imagism in poetry. Wheale (1995:24) distinguishes basically the same kind of division within modernism. According to him, one tendency of modernism is rationalist and calculative (corresponding broadly to the abstractionist tendency), while the other is irrational, exploring unconscious experience and pre-modern resources within the psyche (corresponding broadly to the expressionist tendency).

This distinction seems to be a very useful one, since it encapsulates the major modes of artistic creation within the modernist movement in a coherent way. From this premise one might also argue a particular conception of the characteristics of high modernist art. In a sense, high modernism developed from the abstractionist tendency of modernism, whilst excluding many of the characteristics of the expressionist tendency, such as emotionality, spirituality and spontaneity.

If one were to generalise some of the characteristics of the perception of (high) modernism as a movement, one of the crucial characteristics that would surface would undoubtedly relate to the changing role of the artist. The artist was no longer a moralist, creating narratives, paintings or music to portray immense moral and religious struggles. Rather, the modernist artist became an instrument of discovery, charting both the sense of the complex, shifting world, and of the complex, shifting individual in it. Two important modernist concerns surface here: the concern with transitoriness, change and inner time, together with the modernist emphasis on subjective experience (Calinescu, 1987a:5 and Wheale, 1995:18). Modernism was in many ways an attempt to investigate the shape of personal experience and time, as well as the struggle of the isolated and fragmented consciousness to give meaning and continuity to its existence (Russell, 1985:12).

The quintessentially modernist desire for innovation is related to the above, as much as it is to the reactionary nature of modernism. Modernism very definitely antagonistically defined itself against its precursors, and rejected established artistic

modes in favour of an exploration of innovation, so as to find new modes of expression more suited to the changing nature of experience (Calinescu, 187a:5).

To do this, realist modes of representation were no longer regarded as appropriate or adequate. Modernist artists needed to invent new modes of expression to give voice to the complex nature of existence in a changing world. This project also formed the basis of the modernists' "high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism, in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life" (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:25).

This self-consciousness is often linked with an ironic, distancing stance (Russell, 1985:237). The self-conscious, ironic and non-representational approach of modernism resulted in a view of the art work being its own referent, not obliged to represent the external world, because the task of modernist art was "its own self-realization, outside and beyond established orders" (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:25). Art became less related to the outside world, and turned introspectively on itself. This introspection has been part of the view of modernist art as an "arcane and private art" (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:27), which constitutes a "hoarding of the artistic powers against the populace and the claims of time and history" (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:28).

For the modernist, then, history lost a significant teleological dimension, and high modernist art dismissed the possibility of art having a role to play in changing society (Russell, 1985:10). Calinescu (1987a:3) articulates the same idea when he states that the modernist artist was essentially cut off from history as an organising force, and could do nothing but "invent a private and essentially modifiable past".<sup>39</sup> This relates back to the modernist concern with the isolated consciousness and its

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<sup>39</sup> This, for example, is the basis of the Marxist critic Georg Lukács' criticism of modernism. Lukács feels that modernist art divorced itself from the social reality by turning to introspection and formal experimentation, thus ignoring its obligation to objectively and realistically reflect history and social circumstances and processes (Selden, 1989:31). What Lukács fails to acknowledge is that this introspection and formal experimentation constituted an attempt to "develop new literary forms and techniques which correspond to modern reality" (Selden, 1989:31), thus achieving a different kind of realism. In this regard it is also necessary to keep in mind the avant-garde origins of modernism, which contained movements which were particularly socially oriented, such as surrealism and futurism.

assumption of the primacy of the art work over the social domain (Russell, 1985:13). For the modernist, the artist's perspective and language was privileged over the social domain (see Russell, 1985:245-256).

This leads on to another characteristic of modernist art which becomes particularly evident in retrospective views of the phenomenon: its elite nature. Modernist art is often described as being elitist, predominantly because of its complexity and difficulty, which makes it inaccessible to mass consumption. Pound was one of the modernists who felt particularly strong about this: "My problem is to keep alive a certain group of advancing poets, to set the arts in their rightful place as the acknowledged guide and lamp of civilization." (Pound, quoted in Levenson, 1984:148.)

The experimentation with non-representational modes created a high awareness of the formal aspect of art, and lead to an increasing sophistication, technical display and aesthetic refinement (Wheale, 1995:18 and Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991:26). This results in the often-noted complexity and difficulty of modernist art (Calinescu, 1987a:83 and Wheale, 1995:26), as well as the emphasis on the art-work as artefact. Poirier (1992:104-107) regards the difficulty and complexity of modernist art as a key characteristic, and further links it to the overwhelming negative sense pervading modernist art. He states that modernism is the "phenomenon of grim reading" and believes that much of high modernist art may be explained through "the promotion, by a particular faction of writers, of the virtues and necessities of difficulty" (Poirier, 1992:105). Ultimately, modernism "carries a very learned but always a very long face" (Poirier, 1992:105).

This aspect should not only be seen in terms of the innovative and experimental nature of modernist art, but also in terms of the alienation and disintegration of the culture of which it was a part. This disintegration corresponded to a break-up of traditional aesthetic authority, and caused modernist artists to place an increasing value on innovation, corresponding to the constantly changing nature of the present (Calinescu, 1987a:4).

The austerity, difficulty, anguish and predominant negativity of high modernism all become very apparent (Calinescu, 1987a:284; Calinescu, 1987b:7 and Russell, 1985:245). The reason for this might be found in the epistemological concerns and

doubts of modernism: its desire for knowledge about the self and the world, despite the fact that such knowledge is rendered almost unobtainable by the problematic nature of modern existence (McHale, 1987:9). Fokkema (1984) articulates much the same idea. He believes that the definitive feature of modernist art is its “selection of hypothetical constructions expressing uncertainty and provisionality” (Fokkema, 1984:15). This is the result of a radical epistemological doubt with respect to the possibility of representing and explaining reality, and also causes such modernist characteristics as the indefinite nature of the text and metalingual scepticism concerning the ability to express whatever knowledge one thinks one has gained in language (Fokkema, 1984:18). However, despite this radical and all-encompassing doubt, the modernist writer is still committed to some kind of epistemological quest for knowledge and understanding.

Linked to this is Lyotard’s (1984) idea that the modernist project is based on the metanarratives of Enlightenment, such as the superiority of reason and the primacy of the individual. These are the causes of the quest for knowledge and understanding – even though the modernist acknowledges that such knowledge or understanding might be unattainable.<sup>40</sup> Modernism is thus acutely aware of the impossibility of its quest, which also may account for the overwhelming sense of futility which is apparent in most high modernist works.

### 2.3.6 A working definition of modernism

The term *modernism* is a signifier referring to a group of **diverse movements** which together constituted a radical break in the tradition of the arts. The movement is generally regarded as spanning the years **1870-1939**, culminating in the 1920s with major modernist publications. The development of the movement was intricately related to the **social and political changes** taking place around the turn of the century, and was particularly influenced by the mass destruction of World War I. The modernist movement was a response to these changes, and both a reaction against the cultural decay of the time, and an attempt to understand the radical changes taking place.

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<sup>40</sup> See section 2.4.6.1 for a more extensive discussion of the concept of metanarratives, and their role in the development from modernism to postmodernism.

Modernist artists attempted to create **new modes of expression** to articulate their experience of the changing world and their changing concerns, and rejected traditional modes of expression as unable to adequately express the **fragmented and increasingly dislocated nature** of personal experience. The proliferation of **avant-garde** movements in the earlier phase of modernism were all different attempts to find new modes of expression. By the 1920s the proliferation of movements had largely passed, and modernism as a movement had distilled into so-called **high modernism**. High modernist art is particularly focused on **formal experimentation**, is extremely **introspected** and removed, is highly **self-conscious**, extremely **fragmented**, often highly **intellectual** and frequently **impersonal**.

This was the legacy of modernism that became institutionalised in American universities after World War II, and this was also what the Beat writers reacted against (Holmes, 1981:7 and Everson, 1981:191). In this reaction the origins of postmodernism are to be found, as will become evident in the following discussion of postmodernism and its relationship to modernism.

## 2.4 From modernism to postmodernism

### 2.4.1 Introduction

We are confronting, then, a new phase in our culture, which in motive and spring represents a way to shake off the bleeding heritage of modernism .... The new sensibility is impatient with ideas. It is impatient with literary structures of complexity and coherence, only yesterday the catchwords of our criticism. It wants instead works of literature – though literature may be the wrong word – that will be as absolute as the sun, as unarguable as orgasm, and as delicious as a lollipop ... – *Irving Howe* –

It seems to have become habitual to start any discussion of postmodernism with an explicitly marked mention of the problematic nature of the term and its various derivatives. In this regard, a comment made by Foster (1983:ix), is exemplary:

Postmodernism: does it exist at all and, if so, what does it mean? Is it a concept or a practice, a matter of local style or a whole new period or economic phase? What are its forms, effects, place? How are we to mark its advent? Are we truly beyond the modern, truly in (say) a postindustrial age?

As is evident, there are various dimensions to this terminological uncertainty. Firstly, there is the question of the origins and even legitimacy of the term, and its tangled relation with what had gone before. Many critics see in the basic linguistic structure of the term *post+modern+ism* an indication of underlying difficulties with regard to its relationship with both the modern and the modernist (see McHale, 1987:4-5 and Hutcheon, 1988:17). The problematic relationship of postmodernism to modernism remains one of the important issues in discussions of postmodernism (Calinescu, 1987a:265; Altieri, 1996:766-767; Russell, 1985:237; Brooker, 1991:154 and Hassan, 1993:149). This problematic relationship raises questions as to whether the notion itself actually has any legitimacy (Calinescu, 1987a:267).

A further problem lies in the obscurity and diversity of definitions of the postmodern, since it is quite literally a case of as many interpretations of the postmodern as there are interpreters (Hutcheon, 1988:3). As Calinescu (1987a:296) points out, a “broad-based consensual definition of postmodernism in literature has eluded scholarship and will foreseeably continue to do so”, an opinion echoed by Brooker (1991:153). Of course, this problem of semantic instability is also related to the contemporaneity, currency and relative youth of the term (Hassan, 1993:194).

Lastly, there is the jarring irony that – despite the above perplexing issues – postmodernism has become the definite catchword and the ultimate slogan of the late twentieth century (Altieri, 1996:764). Laclau (1993:329), for example, states that postmodernism “has been displaced to ever wider areas until it has become the new horizon of our cultural, philosophical, and political experience”, an opinion shared by Calinescu (1987a:266). In another critic’s view, the term *postmodernism* may be seen as having made a journey through all of the humanistic disciplines, with particular effect on the social sciences, semiology and philosophy (Portoghesi, 1993:308) but also including disciplines like architecture, biology, forestry, geography, history, law, literature, medicine, politics, philosophy, sexuality and so forth (Docherty, 1993:1). This has created even more difficulties surrounding the use of the term, since its continuous displacement and adaptation makes it increasingly difficult to pin down (Brooker, 1991:153 and Docherty, 1993:1).

Despite the problems associated with the term *postmodernism*, there is a general agreement that radical changes have taken place in the arts – as much as in society

– since World War II (Russell, 1985:236, 237 and Calinescu, 1987a:266). A slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies is taking place, and even though the nature and depth of this transformation are debatable, it would be irresponsible to deny its existence (Huysen, 1986:181).

Against this self-reflexive and unstable background, the problems and considerations regarding terminology and categorisation expressed in section 2.1 become even more pronounced. However, as in the case of modernism, the necessity for some kind of framework of reference remains, and it is with this objective in mind that the discussion in this section proceeds. However, it must be noted that the framework drawn up is constructed around the aims of this dissertation, and is therefore necessarily selective in its focus. Since this dissertation aims to indicate some kind of relationship between Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry and the development from modernism to postmodernism, this aspect will take on a crucial role in the discussion. To further supplement and clarify this issue, attention will also be given to the nature of the term *postmodernism*, the development and character of the movement, and the key issues and characteristics of postmodernist writing.<sup>41</sup>

#### **2.4.2 The term *postmodernism***

It is not clear who should be credited – or blamed – with coining the term *postmodernism* and introducing it into critical and popular currency. Different critics, such as McHale (1987:3), Docherty (1993:1), Hassan (1993:147), Huysen (1986:184), and Calinescu (1987a:267 and 1987b:3) mention various candidates, such as Arnold Toynbee, Charles Olson, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Irving Howe, Harry Levin, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, Frederico de Onis, and Dudley Fitts. In the 1950s the term gained limited currency in the American arts scene, where it was primarily used to lament the levelling off of the modernist movement (Huysen,

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<sup>41</sup> It is generally agreed that both creative and critical postmodernist writing focus very strongly on fiction (Calinescu, 1987a:299; Russell, 1985:252-253 & Hutcheon, 1988:5). The reasons for this are not relevant to this dissertation (see Calinescu, 1987a:299 for a possible explanation), but it might possibly pose problems for the construction of a framework of postmodernism for the purposes of this dissertation. However, since this framework is not genre-specific, it will focus more on general tendencies in postmodernism, and where critics refer to fiction in particular, the underlying tendency is abstracted and incorporated into the framework.

1986:184). Only during the 1960s and 1970s did it gain a wider currency, with more positive implications, though still encompassing widely differing interpretations.

What is important here, as far as the aims of this dissertation are concerned, is the specifically **American** origins and connections of the term and the movement.<sup>42</sup> The majority of critics locate the origins of postmodernism in American literary developments, rather than European (see Huysen, 1986:190). For example, Randall Jarrell used the term in 1946 to talk of poetry that reacted against or moved beyond modernism (Calinescu, 1987a:267), while Charles Olson<sup>43</sup> played a crucial role in introducing the term into American literary criticism and practice as an alternative to Eliotic modernism (Brooker, 1991:155-156).

Calinescu (1987a:297) makes this origin clear when he states that

the term postmodernism first came into literary use in the United States, where a number of poets of the later 1940s used it to distance themselves from the symbolist kind of modernism represented by T. S. Eliot. Like the early postmoderns, most of those who subsequently joined the antimodernist reaction were aesthetic radicals and often intellectually close to the spirit of the counterculture. The works of these writers constitute the historical nucleus of literary postmodernism. In poetry the corpus of American postmodernist writing would include the Black Mountain poets (Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley), the Beats (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Laurence (sic) Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso), and the representatives of the San Francisco Renaissance (Gary Snyder) or those of the New York school (John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch).

Here already, the first link between the early development of postmodernism and the Beats surfaces, a link also mentioned by Russell (1985:242), who regards the Beat

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<sup>42</sup> However, postmodernism did not remain localised to the American scene, but managed to establish a larger meaning with international ramifications (Calinescu, 1987a:297), as will be apparent from section 2.4.4.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Olson was one of the leading members of the Black Mountain poetry school, which aligned itself closely to both the Beats and the poets of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance (see section 2.2.2). All three these groups reacted against the institution of high modernist poetics, and found inspiration in modernist figures marginalised by the mainstream, such as William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein (Brooker, 1991:155), thus exploring alternatives to the high modernist tradition and initiating postmodernist developments. See also Riddell (1992:182-183) for a discussion of Olson's role in initiating the reaction against high modernism, in which the core of postmodernist development might be found.

movement, together with the numerous socially and aesthetically radical movements of the sixties, as new avant-garde movements originating postmodernism through their provocation of established cultural and aesthetic norms.<sup>44</sup> This link is also pointed out by Huyssen (1986:188), who states that roughly since the 1950s literature and the arts witnessed the rebellion of a new generation of artists (including, amongst others, Kerouac, Ginsberg and the Beats) against the dominance of classical literary modernism.

The periodising of the postmodernist development also indicates a link with the Beat movement. Hassan (1993:150) almost whimsically puts the date at around 1939 – the beginning of World War II, with which Abrams (1993:120) agrees. Bradbury (1989:20) similarly states that the modernist movement reached a decisive transmutation with the unprecedented technological mass destruction of World War II, and the rapid societal and technological changes that followed it. However, it is really during the 1950s that the impetus for change becomes especially evident, particularly in the emergence of countercultural movements in the United States (Huyssen, 1986:81 and Jameson, 1991:1). These changes were the motivation for artists to re-evaluate the nature of art in response to a new time, a project which became increasingly prominent during the 1970s and 1980s. This dating of the start of the postmodernist development broadly corresponds to the period in which the Beats started coming to the foreground, substantiating the possibility that they may be regarded as transitional figures in the development from modernism to postmodernism.

Developing from these origins, the term has been used by a variety of critics and artists in different artistic disciplines, with different interpretations and different accompanying attitudes. In particular, it is necessary to distinguish between **descriptive** and **evaluative** uses of the term, and in the latter category, between uses which indicate either **disapproval** or **approval** of the phenomenon (see Huyssen, 1986:202; Foster, 1983:xi; Hutcheon, 1988:38 and Hassan, 1993:147, 151). Brooker (1991:153) points out this distinction (among others):

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<sup>44</sup> Despite his acknowledgement of the initial influence of new avant-garde movements (of the 1950s and 1960s) in the development of postmodernism, Russell (1985:243) regards the culture of postmodernism (as established in the 1970s and 1980s) as essentially undermining the values and goals of the avant-garde. This is one of the key issues in this dissertation, and will be addressed in further detail in section 2.4.3.

What is more, 'postmodernism' is used both as a descriptive and an evaluative term, and not always of the same phenomena. The trio of terms postmodern, postmodernity and postmodernism are thus all used as a way of periodising (usually postwar) developments in capitalist economies and societies; to describe developments across or within the arts (which do not necessarily synchronise with the first set of developments or with each other), but also to signal an attitude or position on these developments; and these can settle anywhere between veridic evangelism or faddish knowingness to resignation or resistance.

Another distinction which implicitly surfaces from the above is whether the term is used to designate a **historical** development, or an **ideal** category. Eco (1983a:66), for example, believes that "postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. We could say that every period has its own postmodernism ..." Whatever the advantages of an argument like this, it would be reductive to ignore the historical dimension of the term and the movement, as Calinescu (1987b:4), Foster (1983:x) and Hassan (1993:149) argue.

Another matter related to the use of the term *postmodernism* concerns the exact **scope** that is assigned to the term in its various uses. Hassan (1993:150) articulates this concern when he asks whether postmodernism is "only an artistic tendency or also a social phenomenon, perhaps even a mutation in Western humanism?".<sup>45</sup>

All of the above dimensions are crucial when constructing a framework for postmodernism. In this dissertation, the term will largely be used descriptively, attempting to avoid value judgements (though such judgements are generally involuntary). Furthermore, following the critics mentioned above, this dissertation necessarily places much emphasis on the historical and developmental dimension of postmodernism, since the aims of this study necessitate a framework of postmodernism which can account for the social and literary historical developments taking place in the twentieth century, from modernism to postmodernism. A last result of this aim is that the term *postmodernism* is used to cover a relatively wide

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<sup>45</sup> The question of the scope of postmodernism is a complex one, and cannot be dealt with here in much detail. Partial attention will be paid to the issue in section 2.4.5 which deals with the social dimension of the term.

scope, with particular emphasis on the aesthetic and social dimensions of the term, since these are the most relevant to the purposes of this dissertation.

Having established the origins and some of the implications of the usage of the term *postmodernism*, it would now be appropriate to turn the attention to some possible definitions of postmodernism. However, such an attempt is foiled by some of the problems associated with the term, already pointed out in section 2.4.1. Hassan (1993:148) articulates some of these problems associated with determining the meaning of the term when he states that

[t]he word postmodernism sounds not only awkward, uncouth; it evokes what it wishes to surpass or suppress, modernism itself. The term thus contains its enemy within, as the terms romanticism and classicism, baroque and rococo, do not. Moreover, it denotes temporal linearity and connotes belatedness, even decadence, to which no postmodernist would admit.

This is supported by Huyssen (1986:183) who states that modernism "as that from which postmodernism is breaking away remains inscribed into the very word with which we describe our distance from modernism".

As already pointed out in section 2.4.1 the main problem seems to lie in the combination of components in the word itself – *post + modern + ism* – and what this implies for the meaning of the term. Without delving too much into the problems associated with this combination<sup>46</sup>, it is crucial to note that postmodernism

is not post modern ... but post modernism; it does not come after the present, but after the **modernist movement**. Thus the term 'postmodernism', if we take it literally enough, *à la lettre*, signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future (McHale, 1987:5).

From this it should be clear that the definition of the term *postmodernism* and its derivatives is fundamentally based on **difference** more than on **identity** (Portoghesi, 1993:309). The most productive definitions of the postmodern would therefore be accomplished by revealing the substantial differences (and similarities) with

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<sup>46</sup> See McHale (1987:3-5) for an extensive and lucid discussion of these problems.

modernism, from which it wishes to distinguish itself. As Hassan (1993:149) points out, postmodernism is best approached

in terms of both continuity and discontinuity, the two perspectives being complementary and partial ... Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt, all must be honored if we agree to attend to history, apprehend (perceive, understand) change both as a spatial mental structure and as a temporal physical process, both as pattern and as unique event.

The relationship between postmodernism and its predecessor will subsequently be discussed. This section is crucial to the development of the argument of this dissertation, since it links directly with the thesis that Ginsberg's Beat poetry may be regarded as playing a transitional role from modernism to postmodernism.

### 2.4.3 Modernism and postmodernism

History, I take it, moves in measures both continuous and discontinuous. Thus the prevalence of postmodernism today, if indeed it prevails, does not suggest that ideas or institutions of the past cease to shape the present. Rather, traditions develop, and even types suffer a seachange. – *Ihab Hassan* –

Huyssen (1986:182) states that

[i]n much of the postmodernism debate, a very conventional thought pattern has asserted itself. Either it is said that postmodernism is continuous with modernism, in which case the whole debate opposing the two is specious; or it is claimed that there is a radical rupture, a break with modernism, which is then evaluated in either positive or negative terms. But the question of historical continuity or discontinuity cannot be adequately discussed in terms of such an either/or dichotomy.

Both Hassan (1993:149) and Hutcheon (1988:18) similarly believe that modernism and postmodernism cannot be finally and completely separated, a view also shared by Laclau (1993:329): "The very idea of a boundary between modernity and postmodernity ... presupposes a theoretical discourse in which the end of something is thinkable, which is to say, transparent and intellectually graspable". The basic postmodernist and poststructuralist emphasis on *différance* clearly excludes such a possibility. Rather, postmodernism erodes the very categories by which identity conceptualised in terms of the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism

may be constructed – categories such as *foundation*, *end*, *new*, and *identity* (Laclau, 1987:330). Consequently, talking of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism involves a more complex operation than merely the setting of boundaries: “Postmodernity cannot be a simple rejection of modernity; rather, it involves a different modulation of its themes and categories, a greater proliferation of its language-games.” (Laclau, 1993:330.) An approach such as this leads Graff (1979:32) to argue that “postmodernism should be seen not as a break with romantic and modernist assumptions but rather as a logical culmination of the premises of these earlier movements ...”

Despite these continuities, the very existence of the term *postmodernism* indicates that there is a sense of contemporary art being radically different from what had gone before (Russell, 1985:236, 237). Therefore, the relationship of postmodernism to modernism is best approached as a dual one: both continuation of and reaction against (Hassan, 1993:149). Russell (1985:237) also articulates this idea when he points out that it is not sufficient to regard postmodernism as merely a continuation of “the ironic self-consciousness of modernism”, but also as a “rejection of modernism, even while the premises of modernist innovation still serve as a foil to the new creation”.

If it is then established that postmodernism is to be defined primarily in terms of its dual relationship with modernism, one might well ask what kind of modernism is implicated here, since there are as many interpretations of modernism as there are of postmodernism. The key here might be found in Huyssen’s (1986:190) observation that postmodernism was

never a rejection of modernism *per se*, but rather a revolt against that version of modernism which had been domesticated in the 1950s, became part of the liberal-conservative consensus of the times, and which had even been turned into a propaganda weapon in the cultural-political arsenal of Cold War anticommunism. The modernism against which artists rebelled was no longer felt to be an adversary culture. It no longer opposed a dominant class and its world view, nor had it maintained its programmatic purity from contamination by the culture industry.

Modernism was never a monolithic phenomenon, and contained much diversity in its scope (Huyssen 1986:186). But, as already pointed out, a certain version of modernism became institutionalised retrospectively, carrying certain dominant

(conservative) values and knowledge, and functioning in a particular ideological and cultural way after World War II. As Foster (1983:ix) puts it, modernism was originally oppositional, defying the cultural order of the bourgeoisie and the false normativity of its history, but what had originally been scandalous had eventually become installed as the official culture and absorbed into the mainstream. What had essentially happened was that the original avant-garde character of modernism had allowed itself to be recuperated or institutionalised within the mechanisms of the bourgeois cultural industry (Russell, 1985:237; Wheale, 1995:37 and Huyssen, 1986:193), thus creating a hegemonic, self-incorporated modernism that marginalised many artists – such as William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein – and elevated others to canonical and representative status – such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Wallace Stevens (Brooker, 1991:154). The original diversity of the modernist movement thus became institutionalised during the 1940s and 1950s, and eventually perceived as a monolithic and dominating aesthetic-political ideology. It was therefore not against modernism **as such** that the postmodernists reacted, “but rather against a certain austere image of ‘high modernism’, as advanced by the New Critics and other custodians of modernist culture” (Huyssen 1986:189).

Brooker (1991:154) succinctly indicates the implications of the above in the following comment:

One needs to see clearly, therefore, that Anglo American modernism was a cultural construction, around selective aesthetic and ideological values, and not a thing in itself .... This hegemonic modernism needs, then, to be distinguished from the historical avant-garde: an unquestionably diverse set of movements (in Futurism, Dada, Cubism and Surrealism) but which shared an opposition to the institution of art, and sought under anarchist or communist or fascist inspiration to establish a new productive engagement between art and the world.

This distinction between the diverse avant-garde origins of modernism, and the concept of high modernism which eventually became institutionalised as representative of the modernist movement is extremely important, as will become more apparent further in this section. It is also a distinction made by Hassan (1993:151), who distinguishes between three modes of artistic change in the last hundred years: the avant-garde, the modern and the postmodern – all three conspiring in creating the tradition of the new. By avant-garde he indicates those

movements that agitated the earlier part of the twentieth century, and lie at the origins of modernism. These movements were inevitably anarchic and intended to assault the bourgeoisie with their art, their manifesto's, and their extreme behaviour. Modernism, on the other hand, proved more stable, aloof, formalist and hieratic.

The argument which develops from here is whether postmodernism's reaction against modernism involves a return to the ideals of the avant-garde, or whether it in fact signifies the death of the avant-garde. Critics are fairly divided on this topic. Hassan (1993:151), proceeding from the above comment, believes that

if much of modernism appears hieratic, hypotactical and formalist, postmodernism strikes us by contrast as playful, paratactical and deconstructionist. In this it recalls the irreverent spirit of the avant-garde, and so carries sometimes the label of neo-avant-garde. Yet postmodernism remains 'cooler' than older vanguards – cooler, less cliquish, and far less aversive to pop, electronic society and kitsch.

Brooker (1991:154) and Foster (1983:x) concur that many of the assumptions and practices of the avant-garde are rematerialised in early postmodernism. Lyotard (1993:44-46) is also one of the critics who seem to link postmodernism with the avant-garde. He states that postmodernism is "not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard, 1993:44). On the grounds of this he defines postmodernism as

that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (Lyotard, 1993:46).

Huyssen (1986:188) locates the origins of postmodernism in a reaction against codified high modernism and the concomitant attempt to revitalise the heritage of the European avant-garde by giving it a typically American form.<sup>47</sup> Other critics, like Calinescu (1987a:229) and Russell (1985:238), believe that postmodernism might be

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<sup>47</sup> Huyssen (1986:188), like Russell (1985:243), believes that the origins of postmodernism is to be found in a return to the notion of the avant-garde during the 1960s, but that the nature of postmodernism changed during the 1970s and 1980s. For a further discussion of this, see section 2.4.4.

seen as a rejection of the institutionalised form of high modernism and a re-initiation of the modernist avant-garde spirit, though in a definitely altered or vestigial form. All of these critics basically agree that the "principle of conflict from which postmodernism was supposed to have issued in the 1950s has now been pushed back to the core of the modernist tradition itself" – the avant-garde (Calinescu, 1987a:299).

However, there are also critics who believe that postmodernism does not incorporate the return of the avant-garde, but is in fact better seen as the parodic death thereof. For example, Eagleton (1988:385) states that

[w]hat is parodied in postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth century avant-garde. It is as though postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of such revolutionary avant-gardism, one of whose major impulses ... was to dismantle the institutional autonomy of art, erase the frontiers between culture and political society and return aesthetic production to its humble unprivileged place within social practice as a whole. In the commodified artefacts of postmodernism, the avant-gardist dream of an integration of art and society returns in monstrously caricatured form ...

Kuspit (1993:101) similarly equates postmodernism with pseudo-avant-garde art (as opposed to sincere or true avant-garde art), and states that it is

to accept cynically, guiltlessly, a facile, impersonal formula for making art and being an artist, rather than to be a missionary converting the fallen to the faith of the true self by way of an original art. One does not have to be in a state of emotional grace to be para-avant-garde, as today's avant-garde impersonator might be called. One does not need any strength of character and inner conviction, not even creativity (Kuspit, 1993:74).

Eco (1983a:66) – for other reasons – also opposes postmodernism to the avant-garde. He states that "[t]he avant-garde destroys, defaces the past ... Then the avant-garde goes further, destroys the figure, cancels it, arrives at the abstract, the informal, the white canvas, the slashed canvas, the charred canvas" (Eco, 1983:66). This dead end forces the avant-garde into the realisation that the past cannot really be destroyed (because its destruction leads to silence) and can therefore only be ironically revisited (Eco, 1983a:67). Despite his assertion of the avant-garde origins of postmodernism, Calinescu (1987a:278) also points to the difficulty of arguing that

postmodernism is ultimately an extension of the avant-garde, and rather regards it as a departure from it, following roughly the same argument as Eco (1983a).<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems as if the majority of critics agree that postmodernism, at least in its origins and early stages, can be linked to a return to the ideas of the historical avant-garde, in reaction to the institutionalised form of high modernism which had repudiated much of the diversity of the avant-garde in favour of a monolithic, singular conception of modernism.

This position is also reinforced by critics who (explicitly or implicitly) indicate early modernist avant-garde movements as some of the shaping influences of postmodernism. Foster (1983:x), for example, states that although it was "repressed in late modernism, this 'surrealist revolt' is returned in postmodernist art (or rather, its critique of representation is reaffirmed)". Calinescu (1987a:312) also points out the link between postmodernism and the "nonminimalist versions" of the avant-garde – particularly surrealism. Huyssen (1986:191) supports this idea when he states that the early development of postmodernism owes much to movements such as dada and surrealism, and Russell (1985:247) believes that "the postmodern vision is similar to many aspects of the traditional avant-garde, especially the dada movement". Hassan (1975:24, 48) similarly points out that dada and surrealism may be one of the points where modernism and postmodernism meet.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the idea of postmodernism as having its origins in the return to avant-gardism will be accepted as a point of departure. The Beats' return to avant-garde ideas in their reaction against high modernism<sup>49</sup> then becomes

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<sup>48</sup> I am not entirely sure that both Eco (1983) and Calinescu's (1987a) emphasis on the destructive aspects of avant-gardism is accurate. The avant-garde is not merely about destruction, but in many cases also about the affirmative, renovating and transformative potential of art to produce a therapeutic transmutation of existence (Russell, 1985:238 & Kuspit, 1993:15), in which case a link with early postmodernism could evidently be established.

<sup>49</sup> The avant-garde nature of the Beat movement has already been discussed in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.3, and will be further developed in the discussion of the influence of early modernist avant-garde movements like imagism and surrealism on Beat poetry (section 3.3). For the moment it will suffice to note the significance of the following comment by Russell (1985:244): "Were we to study the Beats as an example of the avant-garde, we would observe many of the aesthetic and social attitudes associated with prior avant-garde movements: the writers' self-projections as a socially disaffected minority group; their belief in the imminent appearance of a new social type of which they were the model and

extremely significant in terms of regarding the movement as transitional in the development from modernism to postmodernism. However, it would also be a mistake to simply equate postmodernism as a whole with a mere return of the ideas of the historical avant-garde, since postmodernism involves a different modulation of the avant-garde approach to art and life. Huyssen (1986:194-195) points out something of this when he states that

from an American perspective the postmodernism of the 1960s had some of the makings of a genuine avantgarde movement .... For a number of reasons the ethos of artistic avantgardism as iconoclasm, as probing reflection upon the ontological status of art in modern society, as an attempt to forge another life was culturally not yet as exhausted in the U. S. of the 1960s as it was in Europe at the same time .... My point here is that American postmodernism of the 1960s was both: an American avantgarde and the endgame of international avantgardism.

While postmodernism thus finds its origins in the avant-garde, it also develops beyond the avant-garde. A related point here is that postmodernism is also not merely antimodernism. According to Lodge (1977:220) there is

a certain kind of contemporary avant-garde art which is said to be neither modernist nor antimodernist, but postmodernist; it continues the modernist critique of traditional mimetic art, and shares the modernist commitment to innovation, but pursues these aims by methods of its own. It tries to go beyond modernism, or around it, or underneath it, and is often as critical of modernism as it is of antimodernism.

Although Lodge's (1977) typology of modernist and postmodernist art is not quite compatible with the typology proposed in this dissertation<sup>50</sup>, the above comment

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precursors; a programmatic self-deformation and expansion of consciousness through various ecstatic experiences found in sex, jazz, drugs, and alcohol; the idealization of spontaneous, impassioned behavior as an end in itself or as a means to achieve mystical visions of timelessness and universality; an attraction toward non-Western religious or symbolic systems; and an identification with social outsiders, such as the hipsters, and with oppressed minorities, such as the blacks."

<sup>50</sup> Lodge (1977) builds his typology of modern literature around Jakobson's concepts of metaphor and metonymy as the two primary organisational principles of discourse. According to him realist (or antimodernist) writing is fundamentally metonymic, while modernist (symbolist or mythopoeic) writing is basically metaphoric (Lodge, 1977:220). Postmodernist writing oscillates between these poles, and attempts to find new combinatory principles, like contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess and short circuit (Lodge, 1977:229-239). While this kind of approach is certainly profitable and intriguing, it does not take into account the internal differences in modernism between the avant-garde and the institutionalised form of modernism – which is central to the argument of this dissertation. Also,

does indicate that postmodernism is more than mere antimodernism, in the same way that it is more than a return to the avant-garde.<sup>51</sup>

The above points implicitly raise questions concerning the development of postmodernism and the main tendencies it accommodates within it. These aspects will form the background to the following section, which will attempt to briefly clarify the development of postmodernism, as well as some of its major manifestations.

#### **2.4.4 The development of postmodernism and its major manifestations**

Talking of the development of the postmodernist movement is an unstable enterprise, particularly since its contemporaneity has not yet afforded the retrospective distance of hindsight. Huyssen (1986) is one of only a few critics who attempt such a discussion of the development of postmodernism, and therefore his argument will form the basis of the discussion in this section.

It is apparent from the previous section that the 1950s and 1960s constitute the period of ideological formation for many postmodernist thinkers and artists (see also Hutcheon, 1988:8). In this early phase of postmodernism, artists attempted to revitalise the heritage of the European avant-garde and give it a particularly American form. During this early formational period, four major characteristics of postmodernism may be distinguished. Firstly, it was characterised by a "temporal imagination which displayed a powerful sense of the future and of new frontiers, of rupture and discontinuity, of crisis and generational conflict", very similar to the ideas of dada and surrealism (Huyssen, 1986:191). Secondly, the early phase of postmodernism included an iconoclastic attack on institution art, in the same way that a major goal of the historical avant-garde was to undermine, attack and transform the bourgeois institution art and its ideology of autonomy – not only artistic modes of representation (Huyssen, 1986:192). In this way, early postmodernism, like the avant-garde, constituted an attempt to reintegrate art and life (unlike high modernism, in which the notion of the autonomous art work is crucial). Thirdly,

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antimodernism is by definition equated with realism, which also poses difficulties when compared to the argument presented in this dissertation.

<sup>51</sup> Altieri (1996:766-767) articulates basically the same idea. He argues that modernism in its early stage and postmodernism share a reaction against the expectations of realism, but that postmodernism also argues against letting the modernist resistance against realism become a modernist formalism.

Huyssen (1986:193) points out that "many of the earlier advocates of postmodernism shared the technological optimism of segments of the 1920s avantgarde". Lastly, there emerged a vigorous attempt to validate popular culture as a challenge to the canon of high art through a "celebration of rock 'n' roll and folk music, of the imagery of everyday life and of the multiple forms of popular literature" (Huyssen, 1986:194).

By the 1970s the avant-gardist postmodernism of the 1960s had largely exhausted its potential, even though some of its manifestations still remain influential (Huyssen, 1986:188). It is also during the 1970s that the term *postmodernism* came into extensive use. As Huyssen (1986:195) states, radical changes took place in the 1970s, so that only in this period one can start speaking of postmodernism as emerging as a **distinct** phenomenon. Nevertheless, the role of the 1950s and 1960s movements are not to be neglected, since this time period initiated the changes from modernism to postmodernism, and may thus be regarded as a kind of transitional time (Huyssen, 1986:195).

During the 1970s and 1980s postmodernism then started to emerge as a distinct cultural phenomenon. The sense of futurist revolt had disappeared, because the "iconoclastic gestures of the pop, rock and sex avantgardes seemed exhausted since their increasingly commercialized circulation had deprived them of their avantgardist status" (Huyssen, 1986:196).<sup>52</sup> It was replaced by more critical assessments of technology, media and popular culture, and an eclectically assembled jumble of styles made up of intermingled fragments of the now defunct high modernist style, randomly chosen images and motifs from premodern culture as well as from contemporary mass culture (Huyssen, 1986:196).

This cursory mapping of the two major phases in the development of postmodernism already indicates some of the major trends in postmodernist art. Several other critics similarly identify different inclinations within postmodernist art. Graff (1979:55-59) identifies two kinds of postmodernism. The first is characterised by desperation and infused with a sense of loss and apocalypse, while the second is more celebratory,

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<sup>52</sup> In this respect, compare the assimilation of the avant-garde Beat movement, discussed in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.3.

energetic and positive.<sup>53</sup> Russell (1985:248-249) also distinguishes between two general tendencies in postmodernist literature, which replicate the earlier opposition and similarity between the twin movements of modernism and avant-garde. On the one hand there is the seriously self-reflexive investigation of the nature and properties of literary language (where the legacy of modernism is strongest), while on the other there is a strain which adopts these same premises to develop what may be considered an avant-garde stance toward literature and society.

Foster's (1983:xii) distinction of two kinds of postmodernism is quite different from the above. He distinguishes a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction. The latter involves a complete repudiation and condemnation of modernism, and an attempt to counter its influence by a return to conservative and traditional values in art as much as in the family and religion. The postmodernism of resistance arises as a counterpractice not only to the official culture of modernism, but also to the neoconservative assumptions and sureties of a reactionary postmodernism. It is essentially concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition and a questioning of social and cultural codes.<sup>54</sup>

As should be apparent from the above discussion, postmodernism accommodates much diversity within itself, and any attempt at complete definition would be reductive. Nevertheless, it now becomes necessary to briefly consider some possible definitions of postmodernism, together with a construction of important characteristics of postmodernist art. However, before this discussion is attempted, one more dimension of postmodernism needs to be addressed: the socio-cultural dimension.

#### **2.4.5 The social perspective**

There seems to be some disagreement as to whether postmodernism is

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<sup>53</sup> It is significant that Graff (1979:58) explicitly links the Beats to this second, celebratory, direction in postmodernism.

<sup>54</sup> There are several other critics who distinguish different trends within postmodernism, such as Huyssen (1986:188) and Wheale (1995:9). However, their distinctions do not contribute or add to the argument presented in this section, and will therefore not be discussed here.

only an artistic tendency or also a social phenomenon, perhaps even a mutation in Western humanism? If so, how are the various aspects of this phenomenon – psychological, philosophical, economic, political – joined or disjointed? In short, can we understand postmodernism in literature without some attempt to perceive the lineaments of a postmodern society ... (Hassan, 1993:150).

A sensible answer to this would be that there are definite traces of a postmodern society, of which postmodernism as an artistic phenomenon is merely the most obviously self-conscious. As Russell (1985:238) points out, it would be irresponsible to neglect the fact that since World War II, Western European and American societies have undergone significant changes which have altered cultural production.

Critics have variously defined postmodern society as late-capitalist society, postindustrial society, consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society and so forth (Jameson, 1991:3), all of which point to some important tendencies in postmodernist culture. There is the growth of a mass pluralistic society with its accompanying mass culture in which consumerism, consumption and commodification become increasingly important (Russell, 1985:239; Eagleton, 1988:386-387 and Wheale, 1995:10).

The information explosion and multiple realities created by cybertechnology are probably some of the most distinguishing characteristics of contemporary society, creating artificial universes which are increasingly perceived as organic (Portoghesi, 1993:310 and Hassan, 1993:153). Thus technologism becomes one of the key aspects of postmodern society (Hassan, 1975:54-55). Explorations of the universe through space travel excite possibilities of life on other planets, enlivened by the awareness of the environmental decay of this planet.

Technological means of communication are increasingly becoming more dominant, resulting in an almost palpable flurry of technologised language fragments flying around in space, creating a globalism and planetisation unprecedented in history (Hassan, 1993:154). The mass media – especially television – has opened up the possibilities of even more worlds, contributing to the dissolution of boundaries between real and unreal (Brooker, 1991:153 and Hassan, 1993:153), and creating a reality made up of popular myths, pop images, and what has been called dreck – the detritus of popular culture (Russell, 1985:260).

The process of urbanisation, gaining momentum during the modernist era, has become another definitive tendency of the postmodern culture (Portoghesi, 1993:313), resulting in the dissolution of centred systems of belief and lifestyle and the birth of a new eclecticism. According to Hassan (1975:54) urbanism in postmodern times centres around aspects such as the dominance of the city, the expansion of the global village, the exploration of space, the increasing prevalence of anarchy, and ecological activism.

Economical issues have become globalised, as have political issues – which are at the same time also characterised by multiplying local and internal fractures, conflicts, schisms and factions (Hassan, 1993:154). Ethical considerations are being worn away by changes in scientific enquiry focused on the manipulation and creation of life and artificial intelligence. Facing the turn of the millennium, the radically accelerated and exuberant culture of postmodernism becomes even more frantic, anxious, excessive and decadent.

In the face of such an (admittedly generalising and structuralising) description of postmodernist culture, many critics ask what the relationship between postmodern culture and postmodernist art is. Is postmodernist art merely a product and reflection of this society (as Eagleton, 1988 and Jameson, 1991 suggest), or does it have the potential to criticise and even oppose this cultural paradigm (as Hutcheon, 1988 believes)? This question relates closely to the question of the possibility of postmodernist art as a progressive, activist or anarchist force in contemporary culture (see section 4.2.7), and will therefore not be discussed here.

#### **2.4.6 The concerns and features of postmodernism**

The variety in definition of the postmodern makes any extensive analysis of the various definitions unsuited to the scope of this dissertation. For this reason, a few definitions of postmodernism (which have not already been mentioned) were selected for consideration in constructing a working definition of postmodernism.

Fokkema (1983:42) formulates his basic distinction between modernism and postmodernism as follows:

Whereas Modernist texts relied on the selection of hypothetical constructions, the sociocode of Postmodernism is based on a preference of nonselection or quasi-nonselection, on a rejection of discriminating hierarchies, and a refusal to distinguish between truth and fiction, past and present, relevant and irrelevant.

Postmodernism has abandoned the modernist search for hypothesis and explanatory devices, however much of a provisional and changeable nature. Instead, it concerns itself with the exploration and description of the nature of different modes or possibilities of being, with the dispersal of hierarchies and the scattering of categories. This definition is supported by several other critics, who describe their interpretation of postmodernism in similar terms. For example, McHale's (1987:6) differentiation between the epistemological dominant of modernism (the quest for **the** meaning and **ultimate** knowledge) and the ontological dominant of postmodernism (the exploration of infinite possibilities of being and meaning) closely echoes Fokkema's (1983:42) definition. Brooker (1991:153) states that the term postmodernism can in "general be said to describe a mood or condition of radical indeterminacy, and a tone of self-conscious, parodic scepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual and political life". All of this links closely with Lyotard's (1984) influential argument that postmodernism is best regarded as stemming from the radical distrust of grand narratives or metanarratives – "the loss of confidence in the systematic bodies of knowledge which were the product of the Enlightenment" (Wheale, 1995:9) and which centred upon the possibilities for progress and advancement through rational and scientific knowledge. Turner (1994:11) also follows Lyotard (1984) in defining postmodernism simply as incredulity towards metanarratives:

Postmodern philosophy offers a simultaneous condemnation of exploitative capitalism and bureaucratic socialism as 'grand narratives' which have imposed a barren sameness on the modern social world. Postmodernism, which has found important allies in feminism and anti-colonialism, condemns the uniform, patriarchal, rational and hierarchical structures of Western modernism. While many critics of postmodernism have mistakenly assumed that it has no political message, postmodernism suggests a new vision of justice which gives primacy to difference, to heterogeneity, to paradox and contradiction, and to local knowledge. (Turner, 1994:11-12.)

Even from such a selective sampling of possible definitions of postmodernism, some similarities surface and from these the particular features and characteristics of

postmodernism start to appear. Different theorists have proposed different catalogues of postmodernist features (see Hassan, 1993; Hassan, 1975; Lodge, 1977 and Wheale, 1995), most of which are discussed in terms of their relationship to the modernist movement to which they are post. Integrating various critics' discussions of postmodernist features, the following eleven characteristics were abstracted as relevant to the aims of this dissertation:

- the suspicion of metanarratives;
- experimentalism, improvisation and innovation;
- the blurring of boundaries;
- the influence of mass culture;
- the problem of subjective presence and individual identity;
- the individual and society;
- activism and anarchism;
- delight, play, performance;
- immediacy, intensity and irrationality;
- self-reflexivity; and
- intertextuality.

These eleven characteristics (or postmodernist fields of interest) were selected keeping in mind both their representativeness of postmodernist developments, as well as their possible productivity as framework for the discussion of the relationship between Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry and postmodernism. For the sake of coherence, these characteristics will be discussed in more detail, together with the poems, in section 4.2.

Briefly, the eleven characteristics may be described as follows. Following Lyotard (1984), this dissertation regards postmodernism as primarily involving a loss of faith in totalising and homogenising metanarratives which are based on uniformity, patriarchalism, rationality and hierarchisation. As an alternative, postmodernism gives preference to paradox, contradiction, heterogeneity and local narratives. The suspicion of metanarratives is regarded as one of the major defining characteristics of postmodernism, and leads on to many other characteristics of postmodernism, such as its exploration of fragmentation, discontinuity, randomness, chance and multiplicity as a way of subverting authority.

The characteristics of experimentalism, improvisation and innovation are also related to this, as is the blurring of boundaries between entities or disciplines previously regarded as separate. Postmodernist art is thus extremely eclectic, which is added to by the influence of mass culture in the form of schlock, kitsch, camp, popular literature, television, movies and so forth.

A further characteristic of postmodernism is its problematisation of the nature of subjective presence and individual identity, which it also links to the problematic relationship between the individual, society and art. This problematic relationship raises the question whether postmodernist art might be regarded as activist-anarchist, a question on which theorists are much divided. However, the argument for activist tendencies in at least some developments within postmodernism is strong enough to regard it as a viable proposition. The postmodernist penchant for delight, play and performance should then also be viewed against the background of these activist tendencies. Even though postmodernist art is much less anguished than modernist art, its playfulness (often manifested in allegory, parody and irony) is also a way of creating a critical space from where to question prevalent hierarchies and authorities. Another way of questioning hierarchisation and classification is through the postmodernist preference for immediacy and the intuitive rather than analytic response.

A particularly important characteristic of postmodernist art is its self-reflexivity: its acute awareness and exploration of the textual nature of our constructions of worlds and selves. This leads on to the exploration of intertextuality, which is based on the acknowledgement of the textual nature of everything and the dissolution of boundaries between texts.

#### **2.4.7 A working definition of postmodernism**

Despite the **problematic nature** of the term and the concept *postmodernism*, it has been used consistently at least since the 1960s to refer to new developments in the arts, and the scope of its application is ever-widening. It finds its origins in the American cultural discourse of the **late 1950s onwards** and is used to – either descriptively or evaluatively – describe developments evolving from the movement of

**modernism**, as well as certain aspects of **contemporary culture** (including technologisation, mass culture, urbanisation, consumerism, and so forth).

Its conceptualisation therefore relies fundamentally on difference rather than on identity. The **relationship of modernism to postmodernism** is a complex one, involving both continuity and difference. Postmodernism developed from a reaction not against modernism *per se*, but rather against the American institutionalised form of **high modernism**, which was felt to have lost both the subversive potential and the diversity of the original modernist movement and to have become domesticated in service of certain ideological ideals. This reaction initially (during the 1950s and 1960s) involved a **return to and adaption of the avant-garde** origins of modernism, and the influence of movements like surrealism and dadaism was particularly significant. However, during the 1970s and 1980s postmodernism developed beyond its avant-garde origins and became more eclectic and fragmented.

Postmodernism is not a monolithic phenomenon, and incorporates **various trends**. For example, one might distinguish between apocalyptic and celebratory trends as well as progressive and conservative trends within postmodernism. This diversity makes it extremely difficult to define postmodernism, but one might describe it by simply stating that it involves a **loss of faith in totalising and homogenising metanarratives** which are based on uniformity, patriarchalism, rationality and hierarchisation, and rather gives preference to paradox, contradiction, heterogeneity and local narratives. This basic characteristic lies at the core of the eleven characteristics identified as relevant to the further discussion of the position and role of Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry in the development from modernism to postmodernism.

## **2.5 In conclusion: some preliminary links**

The background discussions of the Beat movement, modernism and postmodernism have already indicated some links which may support the central objectives of this dissertation. Firstly, the relationship between the Beats and modernism is double-sided, encompassing both similarity and difference. For example, both movements were born from a disillusionment with the dominant norms of society, from a sense of cultural crisis initiated by their experience of, respectively, World War I and World

War II. Both movements are concerned with innovation, with finding new ways of living, and new ways of expressing this experience. In both cases, disillusionment initiated creative experimentation, and in both cases, artists felt the need to re-evaluate artistic tradition and re-assemble useful fragments into a new whole. And of course, both the Beats and the early modernists were often vilified by their contemporary artistic establishments for their experimentalism and innovation. Despite these similarities, Beat essentially defined itself **against** modernism. The original diversity of modernism became institutionalised as the monolithic ideal of high modernism, and the Beats reacted against the intellectualism, introspection and negativity of this tradition, in part by returning to the avant-garde origins of modernism.

This return to the avant-garde and the attempt to assimilate its assumptions into a particular American form constitute the origins of postmodernism. Beat writing thus lies at the core of postmodernism, while simultaneously sustaining a double-sided link with modernism. The Beats' emphasis on a new kind of subjectivity, their distrust of reason and hierarchy, their need for immediacy, their involvement with popular culture, their experimentalism and activism, and their reconnection of art, enjoyment and physical experience are all obvious examples of postmodernist tendencies in Beat writing – some of which may, of course, be traced back to the avant-garde origins of modernism.

This complex relationship will be discussed in more detail in the following sections, which will further develop the above argument with reference to and textual analysis of Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry.