

5. Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to make a contribution to the current discourse regarding the history and literature of the Beat Generation writers by placing Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry within a literary and historical frame of reference. In so doing, it wishes not only to establish a greater academic credibility for the study of Ginsberg's poetry, but also to indicate to what extent a literary figure that has long been marginalised in the (study of the) American literary tradition has actually made a crucial contribution to the development of contemporary poetics as much as to social consciousness. A related aim has been to stimulate an awareness of the integration of literary studies within a larger sense of cultural change.

The background against which Ginsberg's poetry has been studied comprises the very wide scope of twentieth-century literary developments, from the origins of modernism to the institutionalisation of high modernism, to the transition to early postmodernism and the ultimate establishment of postmodernism as the dominant current artistic trend. Against this background, which is in itself characterised by instability, flux and transformation, the Beat aesthetics of Allen Ginsberg was investigated with the purpose of determining its position within these parameters.

As far as Beat poetry's relationship with the modernist movement in the arts is concerned, the investigation has concluded that Ginsberg's Beat poetry manifests a double-sided relationship to modernist poetics. On the one hand, the Beat movement was clearly a reaction against the intellectualism, objectivism and detachment characteristic of the high modernist poetics that became institutionalised in America after World War II. On the other hand, this **reaction against** also involved a **return to** some of the earlier and less institutionalised movements within modernism, such as imagism and surrealism.

These two movements lie on the opposite poles of the continuum of modernist movements, the one being a more abstractionist movement, and the other more expressionist. Ginsberg's attempt to find a new and original voice to counter what he and the Beats perceived to be a stultifying literary *status quo* prompted him to integrate these opposing manifestations of modernism into an eclectic and highly

individualistic style of poetry, emphasising innovation, subjectivity, spirituality and individual freedom. In imagism Ginsberg found a way of returning to basic bodily and sensory experience articulated in colloquial language, while simultaneously investing this with a holistic and spiritual dimension.

From surrealism he similarly drew an emphasis on the holistic nature of experience, also finding a medium for experimentation with different modes of consciousness and extremes of subjective experience to affirm the inherent potential of the individual. Surrealist aesthetics also supported his spontaneous and intuitive approach to poetry, and his view of poetry as a visionary medium that may effect change in people's lives.

In so doing, Beat poetry not only contributed to the continual process of literary renewal and development, but also influenced the social revolutions taking place from the 1950s onward, drawing the attention to important issues such as freedom of expression, freedom of sexual orientation and lifestyle, human rights issues, environmental issues, and the need for individual spirituality within the wider social context. Beat poetry thus adapted modernist poetics not for an "ivory tower" literary purpose, but appropriated these ideas as a way of reconnecting poetry with the domain of communal experience. In this process the Beats reunited poetry with its oral and social nature, thus making poetry a performance art as much as a personal expression and a medium for the voicing of a social consciousness. This was a truly radical development from the distanced, intellectual and pessimistic poetry of high modernism, and had the crucial effect of reconnecting poetry with basic concrete, emotional and spiritual realities, infused with a sense of optimism, commitment and a delight in all dimensions of existence.

While surrealism is largely regarded as one of those movements marginalised within the tradition of American high modernism, it certainly makes a strong return in the avant-garde origins of postmodernism. Ginsberg's strong affinity with a revival of surrealist aesthetics then becomes extremely significant against the background of his position in the development of postmodernism. The double gesture of the rejection of high modernist aesthetics coupled with a return to avant-garde ideas forms the historical nucleus of postmodernism, together with the development of countercultural movements in America from the 1940s to the 1960s. Since Ginsberg's Beat poetry is intrinsically related to all three these aspects, an

association between Beat poetics and the development of postmodernism is easily facilitated – as is occasionally pointed out by some Beat theorists.

A more rigorous investigation of Ginsberg's poetry in terms of a model of early postmodernist characteristics confirmed this possible link. Ginsberg's Beat poetry shares in such (early) postmodernist characteristics as the suspicion of metanarratives, coupled with a critical-activist stance expressed in highly experimental and innovative forms. The extremely populist aesthetic of Beat writing also links it explicitly with the postmodernist concern with popular culture – which is in turn part of a bigger postmodernist tendency of blurring distinctions between cultural hierarchies. Related to this is Beat's affirmation of delight, play and performance and its belief in the immediacy and intensity of artistic creation, both of which are also characteristic of early postmodernism.

However, it would be irresponsible to finally and definitively classify Ginsberg's Beat poetry as postmodernist. There are some important postmodernist tendencies which are only partially evident in Ginsberg's poetry, and others which are not relevant at all. For this reason, Ginsberg's Beat poetry is best regarded as having a transitional influence in the development from modernism to postmodernism, particularly focusing on the early phase of postmodernism with its negation of high modernist aesthetics and its return to the socially conscious activist attitude of avant-garde aesthetics.

The influence of Ginsberg's poetry on the development of contemporary American literature is undeniable, as is his influence on the broader contemporary cultural landscape. Not only poets, but also popular musicians, filmmakers, actors and various other artists have acknowledged the tremendous role that Ginsberg has played in the development of contemporary arts and culture. Taking this widespread acknowledgement and admiration as a point of departure, this dissertation has traced the exact nature of Beat poetry's role in the development of twentieth-century literary and cultural phenomena. This dissertation is one of few academic contributions on the matter, and the entire field of Beat writing contains many possibilities for further research. The exact nature of the Beat movement and the diverse developments accommodated within it are in themselves topics that could gain from further study, as is the exact relationship between the artistic and social dimensions of the movement. The oeuvres of individual Beat writers, like Jack

Kerouac, are also largely unexplored. Only a small part of Ginsberg's poetic output has been dealt with in this study, and a more extensive study of the rest of his oeuvre would undoubtedly produce valuable insights with regard to his own poetic development within the broader context of literary change. Another aspect which is a viable possibility for further research lies in the complex interaction between Eastern spiritual beliefs and the process of artistic creation – which has also been one of Ginsberg's important later concerns.

Some of these aspects have only been dealt with in a cursory manner in this dissertation, and the research process has revealed many other gaps like these. However, the main prospect for further research that has become apparent from this study relates to the exact nature of the influence of Beat poetry on contemporary poetry. This dissertation has only dealt with this issue in broad and categorical terms, and a comparative study between Ginsberg's Beat poetry and other acknowledged postmodernist poets would certainly produce more particular insights into the matter.

The awareness of these further possibilities for research concludes this dissertation, which is both a serious academic exploration of and a tribute to the Beat poetry of Allen Ginsberg. His writing constitutes an extremely influential literary and social phenomenon which has simultaneously charted and shaped American music, politics and protests for over four decades with its uncompromising critical, passionate, innovative and idealist stance.

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