

# A Poetics of Resistance: The Postmodern Ginsberg

Songok H. Thornton & William H. Thornton

⟨Department of English, Providence University⟩

The term postmodernism traces back to Irving Howe in the late 1950s, and gained currency with Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan in the 1960s (Huysen 256). Since that time the term has lost much of its radical bite, and is often (as with Habermas) viewed as a conservative sheep in wolf's clothes. Huysen contends that "the adversary and critical element in the notion of postmodernism can only be fully grasped if one takes the late 1950s as the starting point of a mapping of the postmodern" (267).

The early career of Ginsberg bears this out. Ginsberg's personal transition from Beat withdrawal into the involved, critical climate of the 1960's counter-culture coincided with his return from the Orient to a very different America. As Bruce Cook describes it, no one "talked much about the Beat Generation anymore, but that didn't mean that he and Kerouac and Corso and all the rest had gone unheeded. The Hippies and Yippies of the 1960s appropriated the Beat message and agenda and made them their own. They welcomed Allen Ginsberg as a guru..." (Cook 195).

Thus Ginsberg's biographical transition was to be a milestone not only in the formation of postmodern poetics, but also in the development of what Huysen calls a postmodernism of "resistance" (292). Bridging Beat Generation alienation and the radical mood of the 1960s, Ginsberg forged a poetic style featuring natural pictures of common life, yet directly expressing his political and social concerns. Avoiding the modernist cult of multiple personalities and impersonal objectivity, he attempts to merge art and life within his hallucinatory imagery, frankly sharing his intimate experience of drugs and homosexuality. He has no use for the concept of the lordly author or poet. Rather, he presents himself on the plane of the ordinary—though his life and poetry are hardly ordinary in their quality and commitment. They are in open revolt against all kinds of totality: cultural, political, environmental, and aesthetic.

To understand Ginsberg's revolt against modernist aesthetics, it is helpful to recall Kermode's distinction between an early, 'paleo-modernism' and 'neo-modernism.' The latter was a form of avant-garde anti-art which entirely broke with tradition. According to

Wortman, avant-garde modernism (which we may equate with Kermode's neo-modernism) was fundamentally based on "a stable middle class of positivistic philistines" (Wortman 175).

This interpretation shows the influence of Trilling and Daniel Bell, who consider modernism to have been absorbed into mainstream culture. Even *Time* magazine once proclaimed that modernism had become the culture of our era (175). Wortman, accordingly, holds that "those who still believe they are attacking the capitalist system by antagonizing its values have missed the point: the destruction of value is a most effective tool in the furtherance of its system" (175). As Daniel Bell put it, we

are coming to a watershed in Western society: we are witnessing the end of the bourgeois idea—that view of human action and social relations, particularly of economic exchange—which has molded the modern era for the last 200 years. And I believe that we have reached the end of the creative impulse and ideological sway of modernism, which, as a cultural movement, has dominated all the arts, and shaped our symbolic expressions, for the past 125 years. (Bell 7)

Given the absorption of avant-gardism into establishment values, any anti-establishment revolt would first have to deal with the old avant-garde. Ginsberg was a leading advocate of that postmodernism which "was groping to recapture the adversary ethos which had nourished modern art in its earlier stages..." (Huysen 265). His work anticipates Kermode's condemnation of modernist irresponsibility. Late modernism, in Kermode's view, produced more "muddle, certainly, and almost certainly more jokes, but no revolution, and much less talent" (Kermode 671). Kermode asserts that "'indifference' and the abrogation of 'responsibility' are the wilder cousins of the more literary 'impersonality' and 'objectivity'" (Kermode 664).

Ginsberg, by contrast, blasts us with his personality throughout his poetry. Nothing could be farther from the modernist dictum, as expressed by Auden, that "Art is not Life and cannot be/A midwife to society" (qtd. in Kermode 662). The artistic pulse of Keruoac can still be felt in Ginsberg's counter-dictum that "art lies in the consciousness of doing the thing, in the attention to the happening, in the sacramentalization of everyday reality, the God-worship in the present conversation, no matter what" (Simpson 68). To accomplish this he had to "get out of fantasy..." (68). Like Kerouac in *On the Road*, he strives to "get to reality" by putting down "every recurrent thought" (68-69).

As impossible as it is to separate Ginsberg's art from his life, his model of reality is never simply mimetic. His vision of alternate realism as a political instrumentality

corresponds to the transformation of the Left's comprehension of reality itself. While the Old Left held fast to naive realism, the New Left adopted the kind of reconstructive realism that was often expressed—to the chagrin of culturally conservative leftists such as Philip Rahv, who supported the New Left while attacking the counterculture (Podhoretz 866)—more in alternative lifestyles than in alternative ideas. Ginsberg, however, was equally adept in both.

Ginsberg's perennial objective has been to make a concrete difference, responding, for example, to nuclear reactors by screaming, "I dare your reality..." (Plutonian Ode 36-37, in Ginsberg 703). Often he has sought alterity in the possible worlds of hallucinatory reality. His mode of realism bears some similarity with Thomas Pavel's postmodern realism, where an indeterminant reference exists between possible worlds (Merrell 9). For Ginsberg, though, the axis of all reference is his own, ever-intransigent self (Simpson 66).

Through autobiography and spontaneity, Ginsberg is searching for a new sense of referentiality. As Tucker points out, it is impossible to separate Ginsberg's art from his life, because "that's what he does... It is his great accomplishment, a rebellious act backed up by an observational precision and emotional generosity..." (196).

Ginsberg, that is, draws his private experience into his poetry to create a personal model of the real. His homosexuality, for example, becomes a building block of this referentiality, which stands as a challenge to given social and political institutions. As a rebel, like Whitman, he stands up against totality, materialism, industrial technocracy and the bureaucracies which serve all three.

Unfortunately Ginsberg is popularly associated with a drug-induced retreat from such "real world" concerns. He tends to be remembered for his eccentricities, though his lasting importance owes more to his realism. We shall defend his place as a postmodern realist within five broad categories of postmodernism.

### 1. Anti-totalism

The first of these categories is a revolt against totality and system, ranging from government bureaucracy to philistinism in daily life. Ginsberg, for example, equates the shallow conventionalism of a "fluffy female" at a cocktail party with System per se. This woman

. . . glared at me and  
 said immediately: "I don't like you,"  
 turned her head away, and refused  
 to be introduced. I said, "What!"

. . .

"Why you narcissistic bitch! How  
 can you decide when you don't even  
 know me. . . ("In Society," 3)

Often Ginsberg's anti-totality motif is applied to industrialism. Here he identifies industrialism with a plane dropping in flames.

In a spinning plane,  
 A false machine,  
 The pilot drops in flame  
 From the unseen. ("Crash," 49)

Ginsberg's antipathy toward mechanical civilization is closely allied to his anti-war sentiments. A notable example is "Howl," his scream of protest against "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery... Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks..." ("Howl," 131). Simpson notes that "Howl," like so many Ginsberg poems, takes the side of "the rejected, the deviant, the criminal, and the insane" (74). Moloch, as Whittemore observes, is but another name for the System (163).

## 2. Pop Culture and Hallucinatory Aesthetics

Ginsberg's hallucinatory aesthetics become his media of convergence between life and art, as well as high and pop culture. In an updated sense, he is democratic like Whitman. Middlebrook, for example, links Ginsberg's "The Fall of America" to the angry Whitman of "Democratic Vistas" (200). Ginsberg himself seems at times to exchange persona with Whitman, imagining him(self) as a "childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys" ("A Supermarket in Galifornia," 136).

Ginsberg, however, finds it necessary to use drugs to regenerate the primal, egalitarian aesthetics which came easier for Whitman. Drugs remove the boundary between real and unreal, affording direct perception, and blurring the boundary between fine and popular arts (Lyon 194). Following Whitman, Ginsberg ties both the fine and the popular to sensual experience, making no effort to hide his homosexuality.

He broadcasts his apocalyptic vision with a street language that shocks us and adds immediacy to his poetry of liberation. He offers himself as a symbol of liberty vis-a-vis a war economy and the all-but-irrelevant culture of High Modernism, which according to Jeffery Hart had become less a literary form than a sacred text (199). Ginsberg revolted against all that by standing with the Beats, and by tying a democratic, Whitmanesque naturalism with modern mass culture.

### 3. Convergence of Art and Life

The real, for Ginsberg, means everydayness. It denies the division of public and private, subject and object, so that the most personal poem becomes a way of "speaking out" (subjectively) and "telling the truth" (objectively) ("After all, What Else is there to Say?," 29).

In this respect Ginsberg and Kerouac were highly influenced by Mark van Doren, their Columbia professor. For van Doren, good writing tells the truth so far as one can see it—but not impassively of "objectively." The truth is a matter of nerves (Simpson 46), not syllogisms. By sharing this personal truth as he experiences it, Ginsberg forges a neo-realist representation of American life during the 1950s and 1960s. In Rosenthal's view, he becomes "a sort of Theodore Dreiser of American poetry" (162). Ginsberg stresses that

Reality is a question  
of realizing how real  
the world is already.

...

It's a great flat plain:  
we see everything  
on top of the table.

...

For the world is a mountain  
of shit: if it's going to  
be moved at all, it's got  
to be taken by handfuls.

("The Terms in Which I Think of Reality," 50-51)

For Ginsberg America is the top layer on that mountain. In short, it is Ginsberg's idea of Hell, and 'Howl,' as George Lyon describes it, "is one of the most frightening explorations of Hell ever created..." (194). America is where people are

...burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the Nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or... run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,... ("Howl," 129)

Ginsberg brings us face to face with the alienation of daily existence. Moramarco contraposes his realist America of the mid-1950s with the romantic alternative. For Ginsberg it was the time when blacks "sat quietly in the back of southern buses, gays were safely in the closet, women 'happy' in the kitchen. It was the best of times—as we see on television's *Happy Days*; it was the worst times—as we see in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*" (CLC #36, 189).

Just as there is no boundary between Ginsberg's life and his poetry, neither is there any wall between him and other Americans. His so-called "reality sandwiches" transcend his personal experience, as in the following portrait of an old man in Kansas:

I'm an old man now, and a lonesome man in Kansas  
 but not afraid  
 to speak my lonesomeness in a car  
 because its not only my lonesomeness  
 it's Ours, all over America. . .  
 ("Wichita Vortex Sutra," 405)

It is the unity of Ginsberg's life and art which makes them so intensely "Ours."

#### 4. Social and Political Intervention

Ginsberg has always known how to strike the bourgeois nerve of America's consciousness: simply show that

America is like Russia.  
 Acis and Galatea sit by the lake.  
 We have the proletariat too.  
 . . .  
 images of the thirties,  
 depression and class consciousness  
 transfigured above politics  
 filled with fire. . . ("A Poem on America," 64)

Like Michael Harrington (*The Other America*, 1964), Ginsberg invokes the American conscience by challenging cherished myths of America's affluence and moral progress.

Linking war and mechanized progress, he proclaims, "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" ("America," 148).

He is torn, however, by an awareness that the America he criticizes is within himself. This grim recognition that "I am America" is matched by other embarrassing self-exposures. For him there is no separating self and society. To change the one is to challenge the other.

I yell thru Washington, South Carolina, Colorado, Texas, Iowa, New  
Mexico,  
Where nuclear reactors create a new Thing under the sun. . .  
. . .  
I dare your Reality, I challenge your very being! I publish your cause  
and effect! ("Plutonian Ode," 703)

Ginsberg is never in doubt as to the root of America's problem: "Money against Eternity! and eternity's strong mills gring out/ vast paper of Illusion!" ("Death to Van Gogh's Ear!," 167-70).

Swinging from social and political diagnosis to apocalyptic vision, poems like "Pentagon Exorcism," "Have You Seen This Movie?," "Hum Bom!," and "These States: to Miami Presidential Convention" address what for Ginsberg is the ultimate issue: the bomb. Who, he asks, "levies the majority to exult unwilling in Bomb/ Roar?..." ("Pentagon Exorcism," 483).

Though Ginsberg's surface negativism often yields to a deeper affirmation, it is never an easy transition. Rather we witness his continuing dialectic of hope and despair. In "Yes and It's Hopeless," for example, he repeats the word "hopeless" fourteen times, letting redundancy suggest the resisting ray of hope that is never stated.

hopeless President waging war, "fighting for peace" sending State Secretary  
to Israel, the moon, China, Acapulco,  
. . .  
all hopeless, the overpopulation of dogs, humans, cockroaches,  
rats . . . ("Yes and It's Hopeless," 596)

## 5. Versus Modernist Anonymity

Treating everything from J. Edgar Hoover to the street culture, Ginsberg has been dubbed the "biographer of his time" (Vendler 163). Often he seems, in his remorseless self-exposures, harder on himself than on Hoover.

I made love to myself  
 in the mirror, kissing my own lips,  
       saying, "I love myself,  
 I love you more than anybody."

(*"I Made love to Myself,"* 70).

Through such private revelations, Ginsberg reverses the poetics of modernism. With Kerouac he confirms Henry Miller's judgment that people have had too much plot and character. Life is in the here and now of the personal (Simpson 78). Obviously these views are the antithesis of Eliot's objective-correlative, where poetry retreats from personality (Faulkner 24); yet not all of Ginsberg's work falls neatly into this oppositional framework. Simpson believes that "*'Kaddish'* is a work of art in the Modernist sense, with characters and a plot; *'Howl,'* however, is post-Modernist, a direct expression of the writer's personality" (78). What "*Kaddish*" and "*Howl*" share is their complete departure from rational restrictions and social conventions.

In most of Ginsberg's poetry, autobiographical experiences support the poet's non-theoretical bond of life and art. Middlebrook points out that "Neal Cassady's death in February 1968 intrudes violently into Ginsberg's chronological record of 'these states 1965 ~1971....' The intensity of Ginsberg's grief over the loss of this idealized former lover produced the elegiac poems, which are moving and personal" (200-201).

The equivalent event, on the public side, was the war in Vietnam, a product of naked power, money, and lies. In this poem Ginsberg took full advantage of his selection as Czechoslovakia's "King of May," in order to blast capitalism and communism alike:

And the Communists have nothing to offer but fat cheeks and eyeglasses and  
       lying policemen  
 And the Capitalists proffer Napalm and money in green suitcases to the  
       Naked,

...

And I am the King of May, which is the power of sexual youth. . . .

(*"Kral Majales,"* 353)

As Simpson describes it, 100,000 people in Prague had crowned him King of May, and then he was summarily

ordered to leave and driven to the airport by detectives wearing business suits. Neither in Havana nor Prague were his views on total liberation welcome; he represented total liberty, to use drugs, for example, and free speech.... (Simpson 79)

As the King of May, and as the spokesman of street and pop culture as opposed to capitalism, communism, and modernism, Ginsberg the schizophrenic became a prophet of postmodern realism with his representation of the American fifties and sixties. He renewed the radical force of realism by bringing it over to the side of the counter-culture, and investing it with possibilities beyond the bounds of any 'given,' Establishment-serving reality.

Beside his more radical or Reichian expressions— "screaming and dancing against the orchestra in the destructible ballroom of the world" ("Paterson," 40)—one discovers the gentle heart of his poetics in pensive lines where we least expect them: "...the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window" ("Kaddish," 224). Here and there we encounter his vision of a possible world that strikes us as somehow familiar, yet so unlike the urban jungles that choke us with their poverty and injustice. Suddenly we realize that this New World of Ginsberg's has been with us all along, "Real as a dream" (from "Understand That This is a Dream," 303-05). His abiding dream of an unspoiled America "dares the reality" of that other America which we know too well.

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