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Allen Ginsberg
and the Romantic Tradition

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"Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell". With this sentence, William Carlos Williams opens for "Howl", the Beat-poet Allen Ginsberg's most famous poem (Charters, 2001, p. 603). Published in 1956, "Howl" quickly became a signal literary work for the group of writers that came to be known as the Beat Generation of the 1950s. Together with Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, Ginsberg became one of the most influential and revolutionary writers of post-war America.

Sometime in 1955, Ginsberg saw *"the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked"* (Charters, 1992, p. 62). While commenting on the state of the world as a whole, "Howl" also says something about the state of America's youth in the 1950s. With long lines reminiscent of Walt Whitman, Ginsberg challenged the literary tradition of the 1950s, while at the same time attempting to make sense of the horrors of the past decade. The world had become dramatically changed, and a feeling of alienation and hopelessness was spreading across America like a disease. About 150 years before, the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth also saw the birth of a new era provoked by the end of the French Revolution. Filled with dreams of "liberty, equality, fraternity", hope of a bright future, and an unbending belief in Mankind, the worlds of Wordsworth and Ginsberg were radically different; the first saw the beginning of a new world, the other saw the end of it. Despite their different situations, Ginsberg was greatly inspired by the Romantic poets, and many of them proved to be a great influence on his work and life.

But to see the Romantic poets as merely an influence on Ginsberg's life might not be the right approach. If one starts to look closer, it would seem that Ginsberg adopted many of the characteristics of the Romantic Period himself, and used them in his own poetry. It is not uncommon that characteristics and traits from one literary period are found repeated in another. But the relationship between the Romantics and Ginsberg, as we will see, is so strong and undeniable that it is hard to think of him without them. This has resulted in some distinct similarities between the writings of poets such as Whitman, Wordsworth and Blake, and Ginsberg himself. The main focus of this paper will be to see if these similarities are enough for us to consider Ginsberg himself to be a Romantic poet. Were the influences he received so strong that he might unknowingly be writing in the style and touching upon the same themes as the old classics?

This paper will give a brief introduction to the separate literary periods in question, to their historical contexts and main characteristics. Further, it will look at similarities and differences between Ginsberg's way of writing and the Romantics', and also look at Ginsberg's use of the so-called "urban pastoral" (Diggory, 2000), a form congenial to both the Romantics and Ginsberg. Finally, it will attempt to answer the question as to what extent Allen Ginsberg can be considered a Romantic writer.

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Marked by changes

The Romantic Period, lasting in Britain from about 1785 to 1832, is an era greatly influenced by the upheavals and social unrest that was happening in the world around it. England underwent a change from an agricultural society, to a modern nation based on industry. All this happened *"in a context of revolution [...] of counterrevolution, of war, of economic cycles of inflation and depression, and of the constant threat to the social structure from imported revolutionary ideologies to which the ruling classes responded by the repression of traditional liberties"* (Greenblatt et al., 2012, p. 5). The common people of Britain supported the ideals of the French Revolution, and felt a need for something similar to happen in England as well. It was time to integrate the virtues of the revolution into the foundation of British Liberty. In addition to this, *"French Revolutionary principles were feared by English conservatives almost as much for their challenge to the "proper" ordering of the relations between men and women as for their challenge to traditional political arrangements"* (Greenblatt et al., 2012, p. 8).

Meanwhile, the aftershocks of the Industrial Revolution were still felt in England. Millions of workers left their lives as farmers in the countryside to live a life of poverty in the growing cities. New technology and machinery made way for a different kind of labour, and the population became increasingly polarized and divided into two classes - the rich capitalists and the poor labourers. The increasing urbanization led to a decline in living standards, while the people were forced to work long hours in horrible conditions. However, the suffering was largely found in the poor communities, while the ruling classes prospered.

Despite the tension between the classes, Britain had plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the world. New discoveries in geography and machinery came with a promise of a better future, and *"an iridescent perspective of unlimited human progress awoke the enthusiasm of the Romantic generation"* (Rickwood, 1982, p. 16). The Industrial Revolution and the colonies had given British economy a boost, the population grew, and the expansion of the British Empire gave rise to British patriotism. A sense of superiority and uniqueness, which had been present in the nation before, manifested itself even stronger. Britain was a ruler of the world (Black, 2000).

About 150 years after the French Revolution, the world was shaken by another world-shattering event. World War II left Europe in ruins, but it also left America as the only country with a stable, growing economy. However, the events of the war, culminating in the use of the atomic bomb, shattered the belief in human progress found in the Romantic Era. Tytell remarks that *"an internal freeze gripped America"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 6), which resulted in America and its population suffering from a collective nervous breakdown.

Life in post-war America was divided. American industry and economy had expanded with the war. New technologies, such as the automobile, opened up endless possibilities and created an increasingly mobile society. Higher incomes and economic stability provided Americans with a materialistic standard of living. In short, America prospered. *"Cultural homogeneity was an ideal during the 1950s, patriotically so in terms of building up the foundations of American society to resist and contain Communism, materialistically so when it came to enjoying the benefits of capitalism"* (Baym et al., 2012, p. 2259). Tytell writes that the previously varied nation of America had turned its back on political and ideological differences, and had instead gained a strong urge for political similitude. From the outside it would seem that the US stood as a powerful and united nation, well prepared to avoid the chaos in Europe. On the inside, it was obvious that *"some vital ingredient of the "American Dream" was warped and out of control"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 7).

No matter how prosperous America seemed, the Cold War was still a fact, and the growth of the post-war years could not last. Under the seemingly perfect American life, a feeling of alienation and hopelessness was prominent. Tytell warns that a *"productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent that it determines individual needs and aspirations, and results in a 'comfortable, smooth, and reasonable democratic unfreedom'"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 7). The 1950s and 1960s were thus marked by the fact that America was caught between these two opposite poles. Struggling to cope with both the aftershocks of the wars, a sterile and homogeneous society, and under the constant threat of the nuclear bomb, writers and artists became part of the avant-garde of modern America. Thus, the Beat Generation came as a reaction to the mainstream and material society of the 1950s.

The Romantic Era - "the spirit of the age"

To be able to fully understand the links between the Beat writers and the Romantic writers, it is important to have a look at what makes the separate periods special first.

Six poets have been singled out as the major Romantic poets - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Blake. Even though they had not been given the name "Romantics" yet, many authors felt that there was *"something distinctive about their time - not a shared doctrine or literary quality, but a pervasive intellectual and imaginative climate, which some of them called "the spirit of the age""* (Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 1368). A literary revolution was happening in England.

But what was the essence of this revolution? In his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, Wordsworth captured "the spirit of the age" and wrote it down in the form of poetic principles for an author to follow. He wanted to take away the artificial language and conventions imposed on the traditional poetry. Wordsworth states that the language used in his poems were *"the real language*

of men in a state of vivid sensation" (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 153). He wanted a language cleared of overused expressions and poetic diction, and instead use a language that was as close as possible to the everyday speech of the common people. Wordsworth states that he wants his language to be avoid of clichés, and instead create a language that would give the readers an impression unlike one they have ever had before. As he says, *"some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose"* (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 162). Language was an equally important tool in providing the reader with an elevated feeling, as the poems imagery, rhythm, and theme was.

The stifling industry of the towns drove more and more poets to search for beauty and happiness outside of the urban setting. What Wordsworth calls "our elementary feelings" and "the essential passions of the heart" could thrive in the open landscape of the shepherds and farmers. Naturally, this became the setting of most of the art of the Romantic Period. Nature became the home of the English imagination. Simplicity and authenticity became something they strived for. For a Romantic poet, man and nature were part of a harmony, constantly acting and re-acting upon each other. Man and nature were symbolically linked and *"the mind of man [is] the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature"* (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 167).

Poetry in the Romantic Period was not merely art for art's sake - poetry had a purpose. The Poet was writing *"not for poets alone, but for men"* (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 169). The Poet only differs from other men in degree. His thoughts, passions and feelings are the same as the others, but the Poet has the ability to feel more strongly and more vividly. It is his job to collect these feelings and share them with the rest. The manner in which this was to be done is one of the most characteristic parts of the period. For them, *"poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling [...] recollected in tranquility"* (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 173). The Poet, being a highly sensitive person, was to become overwhelmed by sudden emotion, and then write it down later, calm and collected.

The Beat Generation - Literature re-evaluated

The conflicts and contrasts found in post-war America is found and reflected in post-war American literature. The homogeneity of the 1950s *"led many writers to assume that a single work - short story, novel, poem or play - could represent the experiences of an entire people, that a common national essence lay beneath distinctions of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or region"* (Baym et al., 2012, p. 2260). Unfortunately, this was not the case. One piece of literature cannot be used to represent an entire nation. In the repressed and square society, some voices rose up that were unlike any the world had seen. In an attempt to understand and make sense of the world they were given, the Beats had to re-evaluate the literature they knew. Up until now, literature was

usually anchored in the real world. But what do you do when the real world stops making sense? You scratch what you know and start over.

The Beat Generation was so vast, that it is hard to pin down exactly what was so special about it. It was more a philosophical cause than a shared literary platform. In "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation", Beat author John Clellon Holmes describes Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in a way that can be said to represent the entirety of what it means to be Beat: *"it described the experiences and attitudes of a restless group of young Americans, 'mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved'"* (Holmes, 1988, p. 65). He argues that the world the Beats inherited was perhaps the worst world possible. They had an impossible task of trying to make sense of the world given to them, and the literature of the past was simply not enough anymore. A new literary idiom was needed.

Improvisation and spontaneity became their way of dealing with the world. Daniel Belgrad writes in his book *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* that *"spontaneous prosody became their weapon against the psychological splitting imposed by the Cold War"* (Belgrad, 1998, p. 198). What they wanted was a work of art as forceful and as full of energy as an action. And an action requires a body. Literature suddenly became not just something of the mind, but something the mind and the body can experience together. And the state in which you were to do this, was in a state of excitement. The excitement would create a literature of authenticity - real, confessional and unedited.

The idea of body-mind holism, that the mind and body work together to create a work of art, is an essential part of the American avant-garde. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger views the avant-garde movements as an attack on the status art had in a middle-class society. Before the avant-garde, art was generally seen as separated from the population's everyday life. Art was elevated, something to be enjoyed on special occasions. What the avant-garde wanted to achieve was to break down the boundaries separating life and art, and make art an inherent part of everyday life (Bürger, 1984). A way for the Beat artists to do this, was to create lines as long as the breath, to stage poetry readings, and to rely on intersubjectivity to connect the mind of the poet to the mind of the listener (Belgrad, 1998, p. 203 and 208). For them, it was not necessarily what you did, but how you did it, that mattered.

Ginsberg's Romantic influence - Blake-visions, Wordsworthian ideals, and Whitman

Now and again, literary traditions survive the passage of time and re-surfaces again. A new literary period comes as a reaction to the previous, and old modes of literature are found and re-examined. Despite their wish to create a literature unlike any other before them, the Beats are no exception.

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In 1948, at the age of 22, Allen Ginsberg had a series of experiences that would forever alter the way he wrote and thought about poetry. In an apartment in Harlem, he had an auditory vision of William Blake reading his poem "Ah! Sunflower" to him. Ginsberg suddenly *"felt, with Blake's voice guiding him, that he could penetrate the essence of the universe [...] He had a great realization that 'This existence was it'"* (Portugés, 1978, p. 11). He could feel his consciousness expanding, as if he had been given new awareness of the world. After these visions, Ginsberg swore to dedicate his life to be a poet. Ginsberg's apocalyptic Blake-visions marks a change in his poetic writing. His previous attempts as a poet were strongly influenced by the writers he studied at Colombia University, and he had confessed to Kerouac that he felt like an imitator, *"a ventriloquist of other voices"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 82). An expanded consciousness and the influence of other Beat writers helped Ginsberg obtain the voice and style he wanted.

However, while Blake was the author who opened Ginsberg's eyes to his own genius, he was not the only Romantic poet Ginsberg was inspired by. Ginsberg's imagery, his language, his line, and his role as a poet can all be traced back to the Romantic Era. By looking at each of them independently, we might be able to answer the question of whether or not Allen Ginsberg can be considered a Romantic Poet.

Blakeian influences and the poet as a prophet

Ginsberg's visions of Blake were mainly auditory. A vision used in Ginsberg's sense is an *"'auditory hallucination' that can be accompanied by a 'visual illumination', which results in the awakening of 'extraordinary states of consciousness'"* (Portugés, 1978, p. xiv). What is special to note about Ginsberg's visions is that they were, unlike most other visions, not directed towards religion or a divine being. Instead, they were directed towards the creation and role of poetry.

So what was the direct influence of the Blake-visions on Ginsberg? Other than causing him to dedicate his life to poetry, Blake also supplemented Ginsberg with a set of literary qualities. As most Romantic Poets, Blake found his imaginary home in nature. However, *"to Blake it was clear [...] that nature is not in itself Paradise but only the glass in which states of the soul find the reflection"* (Raine, 1969, p. 6). The soul finds itself in nature. Blake's symbolism is simple and universal, but powerful in its simplicity. Raine writes that the most remarkable aspect of Blake's poetry is the *"dynamic symbolism of the myth, whose transformations and revolutions express profound psychological truths"* (Raine, 1969, p. 25). The psychological truths he searched to uncover were those of the English nation. This study of the consciousness it something that we find again in Ginsberg, who considered himself as part of this tradition (Portugés, 1978). He even goes so far as to claim that *"everything I've done since these moments has [the Blake-visions] as its*

motif" (Portugés, 1978, p. 4), so every poem Ginsberg wrote after 1948 must be read with the Blake-visions in mind.

Both Blake and Ginsberg saw poetry as a form of prophecy, thus making the poet a prophet. In "William Blake and the Moderns", Alicia Ostriker lists three things that taking on the role of a prophet, or the "Messianic Thing" as Ginsberg called it, would mean to both Blake and Ginsberg. First, it would mean that they would experience visions we would call hallucinations; second, their lives would have to be dedicated to writing, and not writing for the sake of literary success, but for writing about life; and third, their writings would have to defy literary tradition, as well as being opposed to religious, political and social institutions (Ostriker, 1982). Arguably, the role of the prophet could be the most important part of Blake's influence on Ginsberg, as it made him *"vow to illuminate mankind"* (Ostriker, 1982, p. 113).

The prophet, in Blake's sense of the word, was not someone who could predict the future. Rather, it was someone who could see and understand the meaning of things deeper and more profoundly than others. He is someone who could bring forth revolution. He is *"a revealer of eternal truths"* (Portugés, 1978, p. 66). This reminds us of Wordsworth's view of the poet as *more* than others; he is able to feel more strongly and more vividly. Despite their similarities, Ginsberg took his role as a prophet a bit differently. His heightened awareness was not one that showed him the glorious consciousness of Man, but one that showed him impending doom. He writes that *"no poets have ever had to confront the destruction of the entire world like we have to"* (Portugés, 1978, p. 67). Ginsberg's "Messianic Thing" had to be used to make people see the world the way he saw it - damned. He had been given the task of *"breaking down everybody's masks and roles so that people had to face the universe. They had to be made to realize there is no alternative but to seek enlightenment"* (Portugés, 1978, p. 68).

Ginsberg is a poet who constantly moves between feelings of ecstasy and damnation. The lament over a failed nation in "America" is in stark contrast to the end of "Howl" where everyone and everything is holy. He found a way to combine opposites. Like Blake, Ginsberg is a *"'Marriage' between Heaven and Hell, of 'reason' and 'energy', one might say of the conscious and the unconscious halves of man's original wholeness"* (Raine, 1969, p. 30). Ginsberg tries to answer *"Blake's continual call [for the] 'sleepers' to awake, the 'dead' to live again, the 'caverned man' to break his chains and behold eternal things"* (Raine, 1969, p. 31). Is this not exactly what Ginsberg calls for at the end of "Howl", when the walls of the mental hospital collapse, when he calls out *"O skinny legions run outside*" (Howl, part III, l. 129) because *"the eternal war is here"* (Howl, part III, l. 129)? Whether or not he was successful in answering said call is another matter, but it cannot be denied that the foundation for Ginsberg's poetics are found in Blake. After all,

Ginsberg himself stated that *"the voice of Blake, the ancient saturnal voice, is the voice I have now"* (Portugés, 1978, p. 20).

The use of language

One of the most evident similarities between the Beat Generation and the Romantic Period is the way they viewed language. As previously stated, the Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, wanted to use *"the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation"* (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 153). By bringing poetry down to earth, they opened up for a new audience, while at the same time being able to celebrate the common people.

The Beats did not want to celebrate the common people. They *were* the common people. Ginsberg's way of writing was originally inspired by Jack Kerouac, who again was inspired by some letters Neal Cassady had written to him. This way of writing, which Kerouac came to describe as spontaneous prose, was characterized by trying to avoid *"searching for words and imposing structures [...] to let these spontaneously emerge as one strove to keep in time with one's thoughts"* (Belgrad, 1998, p. 205). The ideal was to write everything down as it occurred to you in your mind. By avoiding the struggle to find the right words, avoiding punctuation, revision, and by trying to write into the moment, you were to end up with a language that resembled the modernist "stream of consciousness"-technique.

Ginsberg's writing in "Howl" follows some of these ideals. The poem is divided into three parts, the first being the longest. It contains a catalogue of 78 lines, only separated by commas. Even though it was revised, it goes with Kerouac's idea of "first thought best thought". His language is stripped, raw, and it offers no familiar literary images. Lamenting the degradation of America, Ginsberg shows the United States as sick and struggling *"under the tubercular sky"* (Howl, part I, l. 50), with "angelheaded hipsters" *"who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons"* (Howl, part I, l. 33).

Ginsberg has stated that *"there's no distinction, there should be no distinction between what we write down, and what we really know to begin with"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 18). Poetry should come as a flow from the mind, unhindered and pure. Some of the previous modernist poets, such as Pound and Eliot, had created poetry where the poets distanced themselves from the subject they were writing about. Withdrawn from the scene, the poet was an onlooker, set to record what happened without getting too emotionally involved (Tytell, 1976). This often resulted in a tendency of abstraction. As stated in the *Preface*, abstract ideas, and especially the personification of it, was something the Romantic poets tried to avoid as it was an unnatural part of human language. Instead, they wanted to *"keep [the] reader in the company of flesh and blood"* (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 161). The tendency of abstraction was rejected by the Beats too. They placed themselves in

the middle of the action of the poem, making it more confessional, more autobiographical, and more authentic.

By placing themselves in the middle of the action of the poem, as Ginsberg frequently does, the Beats touched upon something else that was considered to be inherently Romantic. The Romantic 'I' was used widely by poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Whitman. It allowed the poet to place himself in a natural setting, and then comment, reflect, and meditate on said setting (Clausson, 2006). The authenticity created by using a first-person narrative was copied by the Beats, as they too searched for the authentic. The personal 'I' used in Ginsberg's "Howl" could have made it easier for him to perform the poem the way he wanted it - orally. Tytell remarks on Ginsberg's *"impassioned, arousing rhapsody of voice"*, and compares it to Eliot, the onlooker's, *"dry, unemotional, ironic, distant"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 16) voice. As the voice of the individual was threatened by the anonymity of a homogeneous society, the Beats looked to the past and put the poet back in the centre of the poem, thus distancing themselves from the role of a recording instrument set forth by the Modernists. However, it can be argued that the Romantic poets used the first-person lyric to share the elevated feelings of the Poet with the common people, whereas the Beats used it more as an outlet for their own feelings, thus being more artistically self-conscious in their use of first-person poetry.

19th century American transcendentalist poet Walt Whitman comments on the use of English as the language for poetry in this Preface to the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass*. He defends English as the language best suited for poetry. *"It is brawny enough and limber and full enough"* (Whitman, 1959, p. 426) to give him the expression he sought for. The language of resistance and common sense, English was the language of the common people, the shepherds and the American Bard. *"It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage"* (Whitman, 1959, p. 426) - and in this we find the essence of what Ginsberg wanted to express.

In short, the Romantics and the Beats shared the belief in how to use language: it should be spontaneous, true, personal, and close to common speech. Ginsberg took inspiration from the previous masters and combined it with the new literary idiom set forth by Kerouac. The language of the Beats *"represented a fulfillment of the romantic credo as formulated in the preface to the* Lyrical Ballads *in which Coleridge and Wordsworth promised to use the language of ordinary men"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 17).

Walt Whitman and free verse

The call for a poetry that uses the language of everyday speech, also called for a style to go with it. In "Howl", as in many of his other late poems, Ginsberg uses the form often referred to as free verse. Free verse creates a poetry that does not follow the rules of any regular metre; both rhyme and lines are irregular (Free verse, 2008). The irregular pattern opens up for the possibility to use ordinary speech. Free verse was also used frequently by Blake, who sought for *"a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables"* (Wainwright, 2011, p. 94), so as to avoid the barriers created by writing in rhyme. Rhythm should adapt to the poem, not the other way around. Free verse was also used by Walt Whitman in his poems in *Leaves of Grass*, most notably in "Song of Myself". Whitman was a part of the American Transcendentalist movement, a movement that closely resembled the British Romantics, thus making him important in the discussion of Ginsberg as a Romantic Poet. By comparing "Song of Myself" and "Howl", one can see some clear similarities between the two, especially in the use of line and certain literary techniques.

Walt Whitman was arguably one of the most influential American poets of the 19th century. William Carlos Williams called him the *"pioneer who cleared the way for modern poetry, specifically 'American' poetry"* (Pearce, 1962, p. 4). In Whitman, we find a bridge between the Romantic tradition and the up-coming modern poetry. Like the Romantics and the Beats he wanted to create an authentic poetry, and like the Beats he felt stifled by the homogenous society. He saw the importance of being true to oneself as a separate person in a democratic society. Ginsberg was undoubtedly influenced by Whitman, even going as far as calling him *"dear father, greybeard, lonely old courage-teacher"* in his poem "A Supermarket in California" (l. 12).

Aside from the use of free verse, the most notable similarity between "Howl" and "Song of Myself" is the use of a line as long as the breath. As stated, Ginsberg wanted to use ordinary language the way he heard it in his mind. In addition to this, the Beats had their theory that poetry and art should be something that the mind and body enjoyed and created together. This resulted in Ginsberg's one-breath poetry, which he describes as where *"you arrange the verse line on the page according to where you have your breath stop, and the number of words within this one breath, whether it's long or short, as this long breath has just become"* (Pacernick, 1997, p. 23). Whitman did not search for the one-breath line. His main goal, especially as he got older, was to create a poetry that was "styleless", a poetry that would break all poetic rules. Seeing as poetry was guarded by strict rules regarding metre and line-structure, creating flowing lines with various amounts of syllables would qualify as breaking the rules.

A literary figure used by both Whitman and Ginsberg is anaphora. Anaphora is where a word is repeated at the beginning of successive lines in a poem (Anaphora, 2008). It is found in every part of "Howl". Part I begins practically every line with "who", the lines of Part II begins

with “Moloch”, and in Part III we constantly find the phrase “I’m with you in Rockland” repeated. In “Song of Myself” the anaphora is more scattered, but they are still found in parts such as

> *“Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!*
> *Earth of the departed sunset - earth of the mountains misty-topt!*
> *Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!*
> *Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!*
> *Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!”* (Song of Myself, l. 439-443)

Whether Whitman was the direct result of Ginsberg choosing to use anaphora can be speculated upon. Nevertheless, the use of anaphora creates a form of musicality and flow in a poem that has lost this musicality in the use of irregular lines. In a poetry so raw and unfamiliar, it offers a form of comfort in repetition (Hazelton, 2013).

There is more to Ginsberg’s relationship with Whitman than stylistic choices. Both looked to put *“the living, breathing, sexual body”* (Baym et. al., 2012, p. 1005) at the centre of their poetry, to celebrate the individual, and to write about the energy found in an urban setting. Whitman wanted to take on the persona of the American Bard, making himself one of the working people. In his “Preface, 1855” he states that *“he [the poet] is a seer... he is individual... he is complete in himself... the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not”* (Whitman, 1959, p. 415). This goes in accordance with both what the Romantics and what Ginsberg says the poet should be. However, while the Romantics admired the common people, they did not identify with them. Whitman does. The identity of the American Bard is one that Ginsberg would adopt. In his poem “Wales Visitation” he presents himself as a “Bard Nameless as the Vast” (Wales Visitation, l. 23), thus attempting to fulfill the role set forth by Whitman. Ginsberg answers Whitman’s call for a new and transcendent American poet.

Tytell makes a point of saying that Whitman nearly predicted Ginsberg when he states that the poet should

> *“Love the earth and the sun and the animals, despise riches [...] stand up for the stupid and crazy [...] take of your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons [...] and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body”*
>
> (Tytell, 1976, p. 224)

Ginsberg manages to combine Whitman’s demands for a poet with the Romantic’s idea of the poet as simply *more* than his fellow men. Tytell moves on to argue that Whitman continued and expanded the tradition Blake had set forth when he revolutionized the metrical structure of a poem, creating the wavelike flow of lines we find again in Ginsberg. Further, he says that *“we go forth all*

to seek America. And in the seeking we create her" (Tytell, 1979, p. 226). The creation of his own America becomes Ginsberg's starting point as a poet.

As stated, Ginsberg takes on the role of the Bard in his poem "Wales Visitation", a role that Whitman created. The Bard closely resembles the Romantics idea of the poet. Whitman stressed that the Bard should feel a close connection to the common people. He should be one of them, as well as being one with the country as *"his spirit responds to his country's spirit"* (Whitman, 1959, p. 412). This connection to the common people can be found in Ginsberg's "Howl", when he lists with sympathy all the victims America has created, as well as in the way he wanted poetry to be performed: as something shared together, where the voice of the poet becomes a direct impact on the listener.

While Whitman might have been a huge influence on Ginsberg when it came to style, their mindset and the way they viewed the country in which they lived was significantly different. One cannot deny the contrast between Whitman's ecstatic praise of America in his Preface to the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass* and the America we find in Ginsberg's "America". Reflecting the different views the two literary periods had of the world, its people, and the future, the Preface and "America" tells us that the events of the first half of the 20th century had dramatically altered the United States. *"The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen"* (Whitman, 1959, p. 412) Whitman writes about America and its inhabitants, and goes on to address the poet when he states that *"of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest"* (Whitman, 1959, p. 414). The America in Ginsberg's mind is almost unrecognizable when he asks *"America when will you be angelic?"* (America, l. 8). The glory of the United States was all but gone to him - the America of Walt Whitman has turned into *"the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep"* (Howl, part III, l. 127). However, Ginsberg is aware of this difference, and is Romantic in his melancholy and longing for the America of the past. This melancholy culminates toward the end of "A Supermarket in California", when he turns to Whitman and asks *"what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?"* (A Supermarket in California, l. 12).

Ginsberg's nature poem and the concept of the urban pastoral

Urbanization and industrialization drove the Romantic poets to look for peace and tranquility elsewhere. Nature was generally seen as the place in which to escape. The quiet country-side and the life of farmers and shepherds became glorified as the pure and true way of living. Nature becomes the natural setting of most of the Romantic's poetry. In "Allen Ginsberg's 'Wales

Visitation' as a neo-Romantic response to Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'", Luke Walker states that Ginsberg called "Wales Visitation" his *"first great big Wordsworthian nature poem"* (Walker, 2013, p. 209). The two main Romantic influences in the poem are Blake and Wordsworth, both mentioned by name. The opening of the poem has a *"pure, non-ironic approach to the pastoral"* (Walker, 2013, p. 210). In lines stretched as long as a breath, Ginsberg calmly describes the landscape and the natural imagery he was exposed to. "Wales Visitation" was written while Ginsberg was high on LSD, and the poem is constructed as an epiphany. Ginsberg's lines serve here as an ecstatic climax, a "sense sublime" as Wordsworth calls it in "Tintern Abbey".

This "sense sublime" became an important influence on Ginsberg's poem. Wordsworth describes it in "Tintern Abbey" as the connection between Man and Nature that was so important to the Romantics. Walker writes that the repeated mentioning of clouds in Ginsberg's poem *"begin to figuratively echo Wordsworth's 'sense sublime', which 'rolls through all things'"* (Walker, 2013, p. 212). Wordsworth's spiritual *something* which "rolls through all things" is a highly pantheistic thought. Pantheism was regularly found in Romantic poetry. It was a common thought among the Romantics that *"the universe was a living unity which could be known through the imagination"* (Piper, 1962, p. 3). Life could be found in all things, and this is what made Man able to connect with Nature the way he did. This unity of all things which we find in "Tintern Abbey" becomes a powerful Romantic influence on Ginsberg's poetry. Ginsberg's "One Being on the mountainside" parallels what Whitman called the "One Life" where everything is unified. Walker states that *"in both poems, the poet's individual consciousness is celebrated even as it dissolves into the One Life"* (Walker, 2013, p. 211). However, this unity can be seen as problematic to Ginsberg, a poet who usually revels in the individual as separated from society.

The last similarity to point out between "Wales Visitation" and "Tintern Abbey" is the way both poems are constructed around an epiphany. Visions and epiphanies were not uncommon to Ginsberg, as we have already seen. Epiphanies were also common in the Romantic Age because, as Wordsworth stated, all good poetry was *"the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling [...] recollected in tranquility"* (Coleridge & Wordsworth, 1969, p. 173). However, the quality of these epiphanies are slightly different. Wordsworth's epiphany is short, making it harder to recapture later. Ginsberg on the other hand, stretched the epiphanic moment throughout most of the poem (Walker, 2013). What they have in common is the poets' wish to turn these epiphanies into a memory by writing them down. But creating a memory of an epiphany may be problematic, as it destroys *"the spontaneous epiphanic awareness at the very moment that the poet himself is experiencing it"* (Walker, 2013, p. 213). It would seem that, in trying hard to follow a wordsworthian poetry, Ginsberg comes into conflict with some of his most defining poetic traits - those of individuality and spontaneity. This suggests that, while Wordsworth was a great influence

on him, it is not Wordsworth's poetry itself that Ginsberg looked to. Rather, it was Wordsworth's thoughts of what poetry should be that served as his major influence.

Ginsberg hardly ever placed his poems in nature, and instead gave them an urban setting. However, despite the difference in location between him and the Romantics, the function of these settings might be more or less the same. In "Allen Ginsberg's Urban Pastoral", Terence Diggory explains that the "pastoral" in Ginsberg's terms is to live withdrawn from society, to never have to engage in work, and to idealize nature (Diggory, 2000). He writes that *"for Ginsberg, the pastoral is defined by the absence of labor"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 109). However, there was one form of "labor" Ginsberg would allow himself to perform in the pastoral, and that was that of making poetry. And poetry should come spontaneously, as the songs do to the shepherds in the Romantic poems.

Ginsberg liked to live in opposition to existing social structures. He and the Beats thrived in "madness", and they used it as a *"breakthrough to clarity, as a proper perspective from which to see"* (Tytell, 1976, p. 11). This "madness" was also found in Blake when he stated that *"human desire is truly progressive, only when the distinctively human condition of freedom from law is recognized"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 107). Man is ever truly free when he is not being held down by imposed structures. To Blake, the only place to find this freedom is in the city, rather than in nature. This idea, so starkly contrasted to what the Romantics usually believed in, is found again in Ginsberg.

When Ginsberg first had his Blake-vision in 1948, he experienced a new consciousness (Portugés, 1978, p. 11). Sitting in his apartment in East Harlem, he felt the presence of Eden. Ginsberg finds Eden in his urban surroundings - paradise is in the city (Diggory, 2000). By placing their poetry in nature, the Romantics aimed for a refuge, to get away from the suffering of industrial life. Instead of hiding in nature, Ginsberg takes cover from the world in the city. Diggory claims that *"the 'city-hermit' has withdrawn from society in attitude as much as the mountain hermit has withdrawn physically"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 106). Thus, Ginsberg's withdrawal is more of a mental state than a physical state. This goes well with the Beats' desire to live outside the norms of society, as well as the feeling of alienation and disconnectedness that they often felt with their surroundings. Diggory also states that is it *"typical for the urban pastoral to reject the traditional ideal of 'return to nature' as a refuge from city problems"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 113).

The ideal setting for Ginsberg is thus to live a pastoral life, free from work and social norms, but to live it in the city. The low, rustic life of the shepherds becomes the low, urban life of the Beats. Ginsberg seems to find himself stuck somewhere in between: he is too much of a Romantic to be called urban, yet he is too urban to be called a Romantic. As a result, he ends up

"pastoralizing" aspects of industry and the city. *"Ginsberg occupies a middle position from which he satirizes traditional pastoral ideals as well as industrial pollution"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 113). He admits to being scared of the city, fears it because industry was made to make war. This is made clear in Part II of "Howl" where he describes the monstrous Moloch as a war machine *"whose eyes are a thousand blind windows [...] whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities"* (Howl, part II, l. 84). Moloch is the city *"In whom I sit lonely*" (Howl, part II, l. 86). Moloch is the anti-pastoral of the city. Nevertheless, he ends up asking himself *"Why do I fear these lights?/& smoking chimneys' Industry?/Why see them less godly/than forest treetrunks/& sunset orange moons?"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 115). He confesses to a *"nostalgia for cities"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 110). The city and the refuge it presents is the same to him as nature was to the Romantics.

Allen Ginsberg and the Romantic Tradition

Old modes of literature resurface again and again. By looking at the literary period of Romanticism and the later Beat Generation, we have seen some remarkable similarities between them, especially in one of the three most influential Beat Generation writers, Allen Ginsberg. He combined Wordsworth's ideal language with the literary idiom set forth by Jack Kerouac. He takes on the role as prophet-poet idealized by Blake, as well as calling himself, like Whitman did, an American Bard. Influenced by Whitman's line, Blake's vision of free verse, Ginsberg and the Romantics share a wish to create a powerful and spontaneous poetry that would leave an impression the reader has never felt before. In addition, Ginsberg takes the romanticized nature-setting and places the pastoral in the city instead.

Stressing authenticity and spontaneity, truth became important to both the Romantics and the Beats. However, where the Romantics were concerned with conveying the truth for the reader, the Beats might have been more concerned with conveying the truth for the poet himself, making them more confessional.

Individuality in a collective society was important to them both, but where the Romantics saw the individual as part of a collective force towards something greater, the Beats saw the individual as alone in a world that had been shattered to pieces. Where the Romantics searched for powerful moments they later could collect and write down in tranquility, the Beats simply searched for moments of intensity. What we see is inherently a positive and a negative way of looking at the world. The difference in mindset expressed by these literary periods can be explained by the historical events that happened around them, but while the mindset is different, their goal can be argued to be the same - to create art.

Are these similarities enough for us to consider Ginsberg a Romantic poet? Perhaps. While Ginsberg might have answered several of the calls set forth by the Romantics, he did so in his own

way. His style is similar to the Romantics, but he takes it a step further and expands what they looked for and fitted it into the literary style that emerged in the 1950s. Ginsberg is stuck somewhere in between two opposites - not fitting perfectly with either period. Seeing as the Beat Generation is so hard to pin down, this might not be a problem. As Ginsberg was one of those to decide what was to be inherently Beat, he had the freedom to express himself exactly the way he wanted. And freedom was something that Ginsberg valued and searched for for most of his life.

In conclusion I would say that, as Ginsberg has shown himself to be greatly inspired and influenced by the Romantic writers of the 19th century, the similarities between them stretches to a likeness in style and a shared belief in what was to be the effect of poetry, but not further. No matter how much Walker wants to call the entirety of post-war counterculture "neo-Romantic" (Walker, 2013, p. 208), the underlying tensions, the difference of the historical periods in which they lived, makes Ginsberg's poetry so fundamentally different that it would be difficult to call him a Romantic writer. While they influenced his style, the influence they had on his mindset is limited. There is an underlying negativity of the world that sets Ginsberg too far apart from the unbending optimism of the Romantics. As Diggory states, he *"has seen death, he has fallen from innocence, and having fallen into 'experience'"* (Diggory, 2000, p. 115). The poet Ginsberg turned into is not the same as the poet who had a vision of Blake in a Harlem apartment in 1948, who then swore to be a poet and to dedicate his life to illuminating mankind, for as it turned out, the world he wanted to show them was damned. The question of whether or not Ginsberg can be seen as a Romantic poet can be raised again in a larger study, but for now let me say that the underlying tensions between him and the old masters are just too big to overlook.

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