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# Tell Me Whom You Haunt, and I'll Tell You Who You Are:

*The Renewal of the Avant-Garde in Poetry by John  
Ashbery and Lyn Hejinian*

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## Abstract

What does it mean to be avant-garde? Is there such a thing as a neo-avant-garde after the historical movements of Dada and Surrealism, or is the term obsolete? This thesis challenges earlier definitions of the avant-garde, which solely emphasizes those movement's protest gestures. Consequently, it argues for expanding that definition to include concerns for style, technique, and aesthetics. The focus of this paper is exclusively on American poetry and accordingly engages with the poetry of John Ashbery and Lyn Hejinian. Through a discussion around the nature of the avant-garde, the thesis brings in the poetic theories of Marjorie Perloff and Victor Shklovsky, along with the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, to shed some light on the ways in which these poets require readers to alter their engagement with poetry. Along the way, the thesis has a running comparison with the historical avant-garde Surrealism and its often-called leader André Breton to uncover the ways in which the poets carry on and adapt avant-garde procedures. Lastly, this thesis investigates the friction between the past and the present in the poetry through Derrida's philosophy and the related concepts of hauntology.

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## Introduction

This thesis investigates the irregularly termed avant-garde poetry movements in the United States, with the topic centered around the term "avant-garde," its various definitions, and the specific ways poetry might be classified under that description. To understand how the term avant-garde (from here on, abbreviated as AG) continues to be relevant in post-WWII American poetry, this thesis devotes two chapters to case studies of two poets intermittently categorized as AG: John Ashbery from the often-called "New York School" of poets, and Lyn Hejinian, one of the most prominent Language writers. This thesis investigates how the poets use different techniques to produce poems that might be termed AG and how the poetry might reflect developments within theories of language more broadly. Along the way, I will consider how the two might be connected to earlier AG movements, explicitly making a case for the importance of Surrealism and how André Breton's initial project has been continually reworked, resulting in a language of poetry that tends to emphasize memories, the act of remembering and the presence of the past in the present.

The methodology needed to undertake a project that deals with post-WWII AG poetry requires first to take a step back to look at what Peter Bürger calls the "historical avant-garde movements" and how that (anti-)tradition produces a set of linguistic and artistic practices which, although regarded contemporarily as "anti-art" or against common taste, in its historical framework is not as far removed from the developments within society more broadly as the Dadaist and Surrealists might prefer them to be. The focus of this paper is exclusively on the American tradition. Marjorie Perloff has written extensively on the French connection that moves from Rimbaud to American poets like Ezra Pound and then later to John Ashbery. Perloff's work provides an exemplary framework for investigating how these writers defy poetic conventions. This paper will not attempt to add to how the practices of the historical AG movements came to American poetry. However, it will establish a parameter for framing those deviations to add to the discourse on the nature of the term AG and how we might understand it regarding what has often been labeled the first movements of the type in the United States.

In no small regard, this thesis is shaped and influenced by Marjorie Perloff's many excellent studies on poets considered alternative, different, or otherwise at some point not recognized by the academy. In particular, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*, and several of her other essays on AG poetry. Perloff's studies enable this thesis to exist by attaching the anti-

symbolist tradition of Rimbaud with poets such as Stein and Ashbery while nonetheless producing insights and questions which has implications for how we understand that tradition. Along with Perloff, the theories of the Russian Formalists, specifically Viktor Shklovsky, are invaluable for understanding literary technique: how the poets produce the effects that make critics label them AG. André Breton's manifestoes will be a starting point for understanding the AG's political projects and the techniques behind producing those texts. Along with Breton, more recent developments within the philosophy of language, specifically Jacques Derrida's work on hauntology, bridges the gap between Surrealism, Ashbery, and Hejinian. Hauntological investigations into the presence of the past in the present has enormous potential to enlighten the ways in which literature might be ahead of its time. By being already in the future, the AG advance requires us to shift how we initially understand poetry and consequently puts into question a range of concepts such as literary influence, visions of the future, the act of remembering, and the role of language in forming identities in a commodified culture. This thesis consequently argues that we cannot come to terms with the AG without engaging with the friction between the past and the present in an unstable, hauntological time because non-hauntological logic is already known, and what we think about the future is fixed, so being ahead of its time requires an inquiry with an ontology that does not prioritize presence over absence.

This thesis is split into three main chapters. The first chapter deals with earlier definitions of the AG and the relationship with Surrealism, making a case that the Surrealists did possess an aesthetic, despite Breton's reluctance. Subsequently, the chapter describes the most central theories and methods used to describe that aesthetic before returning to the initial question of what it means to be AG. The two chapters that follow are each a case study of the poetry of John Ashbery and Lyn Hejinian. Those chapters explain how the poets confirm or challenge what has so far been drawn out as the defining features of the AG, using the theories described in the first chapter.

## 1. The Poetics of Protest

“Since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as an institution is accepted as art,” Peter Bürger writes, “the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes unauthentic.”<sup>1</sup> Bürger's 1974 book *Theorie der avant-garde* is, to date, the most comprehensive study of the historical AG movements social and political projects. According to Bürger, the principal defining characteristic of those movements is that they attacked art as an institution in bourgeois society. According to him, those attacks were also largely unsuccessful and failed in their protests against the institution of art. Instead, those practices became integrated into institutionalized, bourgeois art. Bürger's sociological reading is not concerned with aesthetics or traditions in and of itself, but with social praxis, following Marx and Adorno, which leaves a lot left to be desired from a comprehensive theory of the avant-garde.

Bürger's theory, although it has elements that this thesis will expand upon, also possess entirely different aims. These objectives can be understood through Bürger's definition of the European AG movements as “an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men.”<sup>2</sup> For Bürger, the AG is an attempt to reveal the falseness and consequently alienating status of art in bourgeois society. Bürger does not dwell on AG art or literature's aesthetic elements but solely on how it functions in relation to social and political institutions.

The leading theory Bürger builds upon is Theodore Adorno, who, according to Bürger, saw the avant-gardiste work as:

[t]he only possible authentic expression of the contemporary state of the world. Adorno's theory is also based on Hegel but does not adopt its evaluations (negative view of romantic art versus high estimation of classical art), which Lukacs transferred to the present. Adorno attempts to think radically and to take to its conclusion the historicizing of the art forms that Hegel had undertaken. This means that no historical type of the form-content dialectic will be given a higher rank than any other. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Theory, and History of Literature, v. 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Bürger, 49.

perspective, the avant-gardiste work of art presents itself as the historically necessary expression of alienation in late-capitalist society.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Adorno is correct and that the AG is *necessary* to express alienation in late-capitalism; after all, the proposed anti-aesthetic of early avant-gardists such as Breton lends towards an expression of alienation in its fragmentation. Yet, if the historical AG movements were the necessary piece to express alienation in late capitalism, the attack on art as an institution should hardly be considered the defining quality of the AG. It does not follow that expressing alienation and not attacking art as an institution are incompatible, and neither should be considered a defining feature of AG. An American poet such as Allen Ginsberg, for instance, uses explicit imageries intended to shock the reader on the same levels as the Dada poems. Even though writers such as Frank O'Hara were directly connected with art as an institution, the lack of a direct attack on bourgeois institutions does not negate the possibility of expressing feelings of alienation in the tradition of Breton. Despite the anarchist and communist origins of Dada, those forces of (late-)capitalism are still very much at play in the 1950s, '60s, and so on, meaning that radical writers still need a way to express those relations.

However, the ways in which the historical AGs expressed alienation and protest are no longer relevant in any contemporary aesthetic, according to Bürger, since it may “no more neglect the incisive changes that the historical avant-garde movements effected in the realm of art than it can ignore that art has long since entered a post-avantgardiste phase.” That phase, which for Bürger was the 1970's, is characterized by how it “revived the category of work and that the procedures invented by the avant-garde with anti-artistic intent are being used for artistic ends.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Bürger argues here that aesthetics were utterly irrelevant to Dada or Surrealism, as their primary goal was a protest against state of the art. A “post-avantgardist” cannot replicate that protest value, only bastardize the historical AG's art towards artistic ends. The quote is the only place where he uses the term post-avantgarde(ist), perhaps because it is easier to label a phase than specific artists. In any case, the “procedures” he mentions must not be confused with a style, as he writes earlier: “There is no such thing as

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<sup>3</sup> Bürger, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Bürger, 54.



a dadaist or a surrealist style.”<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to write about post-WWII poets that are in some way termed "avant-garde," with a theoretical framework that denies them that label initially. What is possible with a theory such as *The Theory Of the Avant-Garde* is drawing out the specific ways in which the author understands that term, not in a literary-theory oriented sense, but in a social philosophical one in the tradition of Adorno. The book is at length dedicated to Adorno's critical theory but only briefly mentions actual pieces of art and negates literature almost altogether. It seems that by claiming that the avant-garde is not characterized by, nor has ever possessed, a "style," he frames and removes the question of literary technique altogether.

By withdrawing his theory from anything related to style, Bürger instead focuses on the protest value as the defining feature of what it means to be AG. Bürger does not discuss any contemporary writers at all as the AG, in his perspective, is "already historical.”<sup>6</sup> Even though attempts are still being made to rejuvenate the AG, they cannot "attain the protest value of Dadaist manifestations, even though they may be prepared and executed more perfectly than the former. In part, this is owing to the avant-gardists' effects have lost their shock value.”<sup>7</sup> Bürger negates the possibility of existing a "neo-avant-garde" on two grounds. Primarily, the methods of the historical AG movements are not shocking enough to a contemporary audience. Secondly, since the radical politics of the historical avant-garde failed to be realized in society, those methods have become obsolete. Implicit in all of this is that the protest value itself matters, not any stylistic element of the work.

Bürger's claim that there is no Surrealist or Dadaist style resembles Breton's first manifesto's attempts to distance Surrealism from aesthetics, but neither are ample for understanding AG style and technique. Instead, Breton defines his newfound technique of psychic automatism as being “Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”<sup>8</sup> The technique needed for such an

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<sup>5</sup> Bürger, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Bürger, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Bürger, 57–58.

<sup>8</sup> André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 26.

ambitious goal was psychic automatism (or automatic writing), where the poet surrenders wholly to the unconscious: channeling the suppressed thoughts and desires onto the page. In the first manifesto, Breton is far more occupied with artistic processes than with radical political projects. As for aesthetics, how Breton uses that term does not negate the creation of a style. Eric Sellin suggests that Breton uses the term "aesthetic" in "the narrow sense of a rationalized norm for what is harmonious and beautiful, and he does not make clear whether the surrealist's rejection of any preoccupation with aesthetics obviates the possibility of the product being subjected to a new-critical analysis in which authorial intent is disregarded." Sellin points toward the limits of both Bürger's assertion that there is no Surrealist style and Breton's declarations of originality. If we are critical of Breton's claims and deny authorial intentions, then the aesthetic of Surrealism becomes much clearer. Similarly, the ways in which Surrealism has a style altogether whose influence has become rather wide-reaching. The absence of aesthetic or moral concern in the art that Breton champions fits neatly into Bürger's primary defining quality: its gesture of protest and lack of style. However, the emphasis on dreams and automatic writing intentionally produces a technique, and with that technique comes a style.

The Surrealist aesthetic is developed primarily out of its problematic reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis. Surrealism and automatic writing depend on strange juxtapositions, non-sequiturs, and symbolic imageries that do not form a symbolic unity. Klein James argues that: "Within Surrealism, automatism had neither remained faithful to Freudian doctrine (having in its praxis diverged considerably from free association) nor to the natural instincts of its artists and poets for whom it became merely one component in the creative process."<sup>9</sup> The principles of automatic writing are derivative of Freud. However, the necessary adaptations and divergence away from that source material have two primary problems which became apparent as the movement gained ground and eventually fell out. Firstly, the ways Freud understood dreams dependent on a large amount of work, interpretation, and therapy, whereas the automatic writing delivers raw, unprocessed idiosyncrasies. Secondly, the proposed "pure automatism" technique inevitably leads to a question of its validity, given its claims based on questionable readings of equally debatable theories of the mind. It is only the young Breton,

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<sup>9</sup> Klein James, 'Psychoanalysis', in *Surrealism*, ed. Natalya Lusty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 61–62.

Balakian argues, that writes "under the aegis of Freud."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Klein James maintains that automatism eventually "became a source of ambivalence and contention, the latter eventually leading to the development of new methods of creative expression which equally sought to capture the many mental states of human experience."<sup>11</sup> These new methods are the most interesting: if the Surrealists are moving away from automatic writing, how do these new methods interfere with the Surrealist aesthetic?

Surrealist poetry, for example, is attentive to the nature of the linguistic signifier and, in the spirit of the vanguard, wants to undermine the bourgeoisie enlightenment ideal of logic and devotion to the intellect and rationality. The Surrealists puts their faith in individuality, spontaneity, and irrational impulses in the place of logic and harmony. Through those forces, the Surrealists, like Freud, attempted to uncover the repressed aspects of our psyche. Breton's poetics as such becomes one that is based upon manipulation of, and mistrust in, language. Automatic writing becomes the technique to map the unconscious and reveal the ways in which art may actively express the parts of our mind that would otherwise only be fragmentary available in dreams. Even if Breton was not concerned with aesthetics in the narrow sense, automatism produced a technique to depict the realm of the unconscious. This thesis wants to reintegrate into the discourse the ways in which automatism and the undermining of logic and rationality has been carried on past Surrealism as a movement.

Although the concern with the processes of language itself is arguably Surrealism's significant contribution to literature, the Surrealist impulse as a whole is not the literary revolution of which Breton's first manifesto gives the impression. Eric Sellin, for example, argues that "Breton himself recognized that the movement with which he is identified did not break with tradition but was rather a part of an ongoing renewal in the arts dating back to the romantic movement with whose imaginative impulses and revolutionary activity Breton and a

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Balakian, 'The Surrealists in the Light of Recent Critical Theoretical Criticism', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 42, no. 3 (1988): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00397709.1988.10733651>.

<sup>11</sup> James, 'Psychoanalysis', 48.

number of his colleagues may be identified.”<sup>12</sup> Surrealism, although an AG, is not separated from time and artistic practices prior. Instead, the motivation of working with revolutionary politics and mapping the imagination dates back at least to the Romantics. Breton's theories about the writing process itself are perhaps Surrealism's most lasting claim to originality. However, the ways in which that process created a style that is dependent on what we most broadly might call ambiguity, is the true legacy of Surrealism in literature. Automatic writing inevitably produced texts that were either wholly incoherent or highly ambiguous. The task of the writers to come, then, as the belief in and devotion to "pure automatism" fell out, became to advance Breton's literary project away from its Freudian origin and towards a style that engages more sophisticatedly with the nature of the linguistic signifier.

Because even though the Surrealists engaged in an ongoing renewal of the arts, it was how they focused on the mechanics of language itself which was the true literary revolution. The significance of Surrealism on later poets is not, as Bürger would have it, its gesture of protest but its contribution to, and occupation with, artistic technique. What makes the Surrealists the primary AG for understanding movements such as language writing is that, as Balakian suggests, the Surrealists were the first to make “their concern with the manipulation of language the pivot of their theories on poetry.”<sup>13</sup> In the realm of literary theory or poetics, the Surrealists are the first who focuses on mistrust of language and the manipulation of its mechanics, which reflects the coming work of phenomenological and post-structuralist critics. The irony, however, Balakain writes, is that “the surrealists are virtually excluded from the frame of reference of the hermeneutic critics, the deconstructions, and other recent theoretical writers.”<sup>14</sup> Those critics, such as Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, frequently pay homage to Friedrich Nietzsche, whose mistrust of language within epistemology mirrors the

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<sup>12</sup> Eric Sellin, ‘Simultaneity: Driving Force of the Surrealist Aesthetic’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 21, no. 1 (1975): 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/440525>.

<sup>13</sup> Balakian, ‘The Surrealists in the Light of Recent Critical Theoretical Criticism’, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Sellin, ‘Simultaneity: Driving Force of the Surrealist Aesthetic’, *Twentieth-Century Literature* 21, no. 1 (1975): 173, <https://doi.org/10.2307/440525>.

Surrealists.<sup>15</sup> However, the Surrealists were the first to create a process, a poetics that protests language's ability for accurate representation. The style that emerges from that manipulation of language is dependent primarily on a language of undecidability, ambiguity, or indeterminacy.

### 1.1 Indeterminacy, Defamiliarization, and Play

The influence of Surrealism on American AG poetry has been wide-reaching; however, since the Surrealists partook in an ongoing renewal of the arts, there are other places to start for this aesthetic. Marjorie Perloff establishes a genealogy that moves from Arthur Rimbaud and eventually reaching John Ashbery, arguing that:

what we loosely call "Modernism" in Anglo-American poetry is really made up of two separate though often interwoven strands: the Symbolist mode that Lowell inherited from Eliot and Baudelaire and, beyond them, from the great Romantic poets, and the "anti-Symbolist" mode of indeterminacy or "undecidability," of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of the Illuminations.

Perloff's lineage is characterized in its entirety by style, a type of maneuvering in language that emphasizes the need for the reader to make judgments about meaning in a poem that does not provide clear answers. Perloff refers to this writing style as *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, which is not all too different from a range of other theories on the inevitable need for interpretation of language and the relationships between signifier and signified. We generally refer to "ambiguity" as the most general and wide-reaching term for this type of meaning, but the two are not mutually exclusive. Perloff's theory is not about any specific AG or attempts to discuss its nature but nonetheless considers the influences and style of poets such as Ashbery and Samuel Beckett, both widely characterized as AG.

Unlike Bürger, Perloff does not dwell on whether or not any poets attempt to protest or deserve recognition as AG but examines a literary style that moved alongside but separates from the Modernists. She calls this practice, starting with Rimbaud, among other things, "The Other Tradition," taken from a poem by John Ashbery. The fact that it is "other" is interesting in and of itself, but when engaging with AG poetry, the "otherness" is practically a defining

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, several of the essays collected in Clayton Koelb, ed., *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays pro and Contra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

quality through its revolutionary nature. AG art engages with otherness, either by a signal of disapproval against bourgeois intuitions or its accompanying style of realism. The historical AG movements emerged alongside Modernism and are sometimes described as a part of that movement. One way of differentiating the AG from Modernism is by the ways in which they engage with representation. Modernists such as T.S. Eliot or Virginia Woolf attempted to be more realistic than practitioners of realism and naturalism through new methods to render the actual thinking process with techniques such as stream of consciousness. Even for the Surrealists, who wanted to reveal "the actual functioning of thought," the writing process itself became the vital priority that allowed the mind's paradoxes or idiosyncrasies to surface. Rimbaud is the start of this tradition for Perloff and acknowledges the vast influence he has had on Surrealism.<sup>16</sup> Given the book's focus on Anglo-American poetry, no original Surrealist is included in Perloff's study, prioritizing Gertrude Stein over Louis Aragon. However, that does not exclude the Surrealists as another influence on the branch of Anglo-American poetry Perloff discusses altogether, it instead means Breton and his group are a part of the legacy of Rimbaud. However, unlike him, they formed an AG and were assertively open about their style and technique. The direct influence of the Surrealist style may be located – along with Hejinian and Ashbery – in Beckett's AG "Theatre of The Absurd," whose precursors in Dada and Surrealism are well documented elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

The general principle for the literary style of indeterminacy Perloff describes is an awareness of the interwoven relationships between signifiers and signified and the ways in which those poets write with indeterminate reference. For example, Perloff compares Ashbery's verbal landscape in "These Lacustrine Cities" to Eliot's *Waste Land*, suggesting that "Eliot's unreal city is, first and foremost, a very real fog-bound London," whereas that direct association is impossible in Ashbery's poem where the connection is "not with real hotels, city bridges, and business deals, but with such contradictory images as deserts and violent seas."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>17</sup> For instance in Alan Warren Friedman, *Surreal Beckett: Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and Surrealism*, 40 (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 12.

The different elements in Ashbery's poem are only associated with one another and have, properly speaking, no reference to the real world. However, the lack of outside reference is not the same as being non-referential. Instead, the connections between words and phrases cannot be determined or made clear by imposing something outside the poem.

We have a vast range of terms at our disposal for that potentiality. Indeterminacy as a theory is similar to several other terms, such as Derrida's "freeplay" or Wittgenstein's "language games". Perloff's emphasis on the lack of outside reference draws attention to, among others, Derrida's eminent claim that there is "no outside-text."<sup>19</sup> For Derrida, language as a system is a play of differences with no fixed center or a "transcendental signified." Derrida's project is enormous and challenging to do justice in a single chapter. Moreover, since Derrida is adamant about insisting that deconstruction is neither a method nor a technique, its usefulness for understanding AG poetry is not the same as more straightforward theories or poetics. Deconstruction is not included in this section as a theory that can be applied directly to any of the poets. Deconstruction, put most simply, produces and establishes a set of practices and ways of seeing the relationships between text and meaning.

The plenitude of operators to designate a language of undecidability from critics can be acknowledged in literary analysis as an attempt at what Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky called defamiliarization (*ostranenie*). According to Shklovsky, objects and events in our everyday life are subject to our habitual ways of looking and experiencing. Ordinary matters become monotonous and repetitive as we have experienced them so often that we lose the ability to see them truly. Shklovsky considers that "routine actions become automatic" and that "It is the automatization process which explains the laws of our prosaic speech."<sup>20</sup> He then distinguishes between prosaic and poetic language, giving the task of making objects fresh again through defamiliarization to the artist. The task of art, for Shklovsky, is to:

[g]ive back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the "ostranenie" of things and the complication

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins university press, 1976), 158.

<sup>20</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Device (1917/1919)', in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 79.

of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception as the process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged.<sup>21</sup>

Through a range of examples from Tolstoy, Shkolvsky expands on his term and attempts to reveal the mechanics in language that produce the “sensation of seeing” as opposed to the habitual ways of looking.

What Shkolvsky contributed to literary studies was a more scientific approach to looking at texts which rejected historical-biographical approaches in favor of a text’s aesthetic autonomy. The Shkolvsky that reads *War and Peace* in “Art as Device” is not interested in social conditions or Tolstoy’s life, but rather the technique of writing he employs to create that novel. In direct contrast to Shkolvsky is a critic like Peter Bürger, who entirely neglects aesthetics and technique. But, of course, Bürger has an admirable focus on the sociology of the avant-garde, so he should not be critiqued for lack of focus on artistic method. However, in that process, he does make claims about the AG’s style and aesthetic, which deserve to be challenged. That is not to say that one approach is better than the other, but rather that when trying to uncover how a poem works autonomously, one needs to approach the text closer to Shkolvsky. Moreover, given how Shkolvsky engages with how a text produces meaning and poetic effects, he has had a considerable influence on other semantic fields, such as structuralism, which Derrida critiqued for its representations of binary and direct relationships between signs and signified.

Despite structuralist adaptations of formalist principles, defamiliarization nonetheless resembles Derridean deferral and delay. Lawrence Crawford explains how “Derrida's deconstructive work is directed toward a break with this sort of "classical semiology" which can only define the linguistic/ written sign as a deferral of or substitution for perceptual presence.” That simple process is what Derrida aims to challenge, yet Shkolvsky’s terms are not in opposition to *différance*. With Crawford explain further:

What Shklovskij wants to show is that the operation of defamiliarization and its consequent perception in the literary system is like the Winding of a watch (the introduction of energy into a physical system): both "originate" difference, change, value, motion, presence. Considered against the general and functional background of Derridian *différance*, what Shklovskij calls "perception" can be considered a

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<sup>21</sup> Shkolvsky, 80.



matrix for production of difference.<sup>22</sup>

Defamiliarization is a technique for producing ambiguity or indeterminacy: it is not a term in opposition to *différance*, but one that can reveal how we might see it at play in a text. In order to understand how that play works, one needs to engage with more of Derrida's operators, such as the trace.

As opposed to Symbolism, where the images come together to signal something outside the text itself, writers in the tradition of Rimbaud engage extensively with the play of those signifiers, rejecting the idea that they should signal anything outside the poem. Similarly, on a much larger scale, Derrida argues that "One could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play."<sup>23</sup> When the idea of a primary signified or fixed center is distorted, the possibility of an endless play with signifiers opens up, and it is this aspect of language that Rimbaud's prose poetry was the first exemplar of in literature, a development that to date has found its most refined and successful application by the Language poets. Moreover, along with the rejection of logocentrism, freeplay is based on what Derrida calls *différance*, which, as Nicholas Royle points out, has been defined by Derrida himself and others in a variety of different ways.<sup>24</sup> In short, *différance* refers to the ways in which meaning is continually and endlessly deferred, as any definition of a word inevitably leads to more words in the web of language. The deferral (and delay) in meaning that Derrida refers to is far more extensive than Perloff's limited argument about poetics. However, the two both pick up on the same impulse of the process of semiosis.

The meaning and consequences of the delay and deferral in interpreting signs are elaborated on in what Derrida calls "the trace," which is "not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace

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<sup>22</sup> Lawrence Crawford, 'Viktor Shklovskij: *Différance* in Defamiliarization', *Comparative Literature* 36, no. 3 (1984): 212, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1770260>.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 73.

has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace.”<sup>25</sup> In the web of language, traces of other concepts always interfere with the decoding of the sign. According to Derrida, the traces of these other concepts are not present as such, but through their resemblances or unlikeness with the signified interferes and “refers beyond itself” in the map of language. The trace is not present and has “no place” since it is only a representation of reality and not present in the signified itself but is part of the continual deferral process. Jonathan Culler suggested in the late 1970s that Grammatology was never meant to replace a logocentric semiology and that Derrida consequently engaged in “a series of strategic manoeuvres and displacements in which he modifies his terms, producing a chain of related but non-identical operators - *différance*, *supplément*, *trace*, *hymen*, *espacement*, *greffe*, *pharmakon*, *parergon* - to prevent any of his terms from becoming "concepts" of a new science.”<sup>26</sup> Derrida was to add at least one more term to this list of decidedly resembling operators: the specter.

## 1.2 Hauntology

Derrida introduced the specter in one of his later works, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, on the lasting influence of Karl Marx after the fall of the East bloc. In the book, Derrida endeavors to explore the ways in which Marx's lasting influence continues to be felt across a Europe dominated by neoliberalism. To describe that lasting influence from beyond the grave, Derrida uses the idea of a specter and the ways in which it operates in history as hauntology, a portmanteau of *haunting* and *ontology*. Ontology is the study of the nature of being and existence, and hauntology becomes for Derrida a type of ontology that emphasizes the presence of that which is neither entirely present nor absent but which might be said to “haunt” the present. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida explains that: “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept,

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 156.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Culler, ‘Semiotics and Deconstruction’, *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1/2 (1979): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772044>.

beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.”<sup>27</sup> A haunting is not present per se, but still interferes with our understanding of being and time, as the past always interferes. Derrida’s introduction of a specter fits into his broader concept of deconstruction as it is another way to attack logocentrism which prioritizes presence over absence, what he calls the “metaphysics of presence”. The specter is neither present nor absent, but exist in-between.

Since Derrida continually modifies his terms, they tend to be similar and interconnected. For example, Derrida's most used and widely discussed operator is arguably *différance*. Eric Savoy understands the temporal aspect of *différance* as

a model of the temporality of the signifier (and, by extension, of the temporal gaps in the epistemology of the subject) that it reduces to non-coherence. The signifier presents no plentitude of reference in the present; rather, it persists, under the repetition compulsion, as the trace that brings forward that which has come before and anticipates its recurrence in the future.<sup>28</sup>

The trace, as discussed, is a similar operator to the specter but is adapted to refer not only to the trace of other words in interpreting meaning but to the very fragments from the past that interfere with our understanding of presence; the present always carries a trace of the past. Savoy reads Derrida as defining this specific working of *différance* in history as hauntology, which is “a playful neologism that refers to the temporal and ontological disjunction in which a sign that purports to represent historical origin functions as a place-holder for that which is beyond recovery or full narrative understanding and thus may be said to haunt the present.”<sup>29</sup> The disjunction he refers to is a kind of trace, where the process of deferral and delay produces a set of terms that we are unable to recover but which nonetheless is present in the sign and interferes with the present. Hauntology, as a range of different ideas, is then

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International’ (New York: Routledge, 1994), 202.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Savoy, ‘Jamesian Hauntology: On the Poetics of Condensation’, *The Henry James Review* 38, no. 3 (2017): 239, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hjr.2017.0020>.

<sup>29</sup> Savoy, 240.

primarily anchored in Derridean deconstruction and refers to the specific working of *différance* in history and is comparable to other operators such as the trace. Like Savoy, Mark Fisher argues that “hauntology explicitly brings into play the question of time in a way that had not quite been the case with the trace or *différance*.”<sup>30</sup> That concern with time also does not need to be reserved for supernatural fiction. Instead, Fisher asks us to think about hauntology as “*the agency of the virtual*, with the specter understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing.”<sup>31</sup>

Fisher also modifies the term “hauntology” to describe the current climate of popular culture and entertainment that appears stuck in the past, unable to reinvent itself and continually reaches into the past for visions of the future. Fisher, who is primarily interested in popular culture rather than metaphysics, uses the term hauntology to refer to a kind of cultural ontology in which we are haunted by our past art, media, and entertainment. According to Fisher, we try to relive our anticipation of the future by going back to the past. In the climate of late-capitalism, people no longer try to imagine a different future: neoliberalism demands quick results and the repetition of old, already established cultural forms. Through a series of analyzes of popular culture, Fisher seeks to examine how the effects of the changing political environment affect our understanding and expectations of the past and the future. Given this duality, Fisher explains that we can distinguish between two directions in hauntology, where: “The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality (the traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat’, a fatal pattern).”<sup>32</sup> This first sense is the interference of the past in the present, which exists in-between presence and absence. Fisher explains further that: “The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour).” The second sense determines how we view the future, and reflects the ways in which 21<sup>st</sup> century culture tends to repeat

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero books, 2013), 17.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Fisher, ‘What Is Hauntology?’, *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>.

<sup>32</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 19.

past visions of the future since we are no longer able to imagine any future radically different from the one we currently live in.

The lack on an ability to imagine differently gives way to Fisher concepts of “lost futures”, or “the slow cancelation of the future”, which he writes “has been accompanied by a deflation of expectations. There can be few who believe that in the coming year a record as great as, say, the Stooges’ *Funhouse* or Sly Stone’s *There’s A Riot Goin’ On* will be released. Still less do we expect the kind of ruptures brought about by The Beatles or disco.”<sup>33</sup> The cancelation of future innovation has severe consequences if we are to hold on to a belief of a future for the avant-garde who, through radical innovation, are tasked with representing an unimaginable future. For instance, Fisher writes regarding music that: “The future is always experienced as a haunting: as virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. What hauntological music mourns is less the failure of a future to transpire—the future as actuality—than the disappearance of this effective virtuality.”<sup>34</sup> The ways in which we might imagine the future depends on the present, and those visions we have today of the future are radically different than earlier representations. Hauntological music engages with that loss of a virtuality, the vision of the future itself rather than the difference between the present day and earlier expectation of what is now the present would look like. The historical AG were defined by their devotion to radical innovation, yet if hauntological literature follows the path of music, it is only possible to engage with loss rather than any new visions.

Regarding the AG, hauntology enlightens three of its central aspects: the social and political reforms, the influence of other traditions, and its aesthetic that engages with the presence of the past. Although this thesis deals primarily with AG style and technique, the political projects of the historical AG movements have colored the term to the extent that removing the term entirety from social praxis is impossible. Politically the historical AG movements championed anti-art, a part of the endeavor to undermine the institution of art whose style was tailored to the tastes of the bourgeoisie, and those attacks are not too dissimilar from Derrida's attack on logocentrism. For instance, Terry Eagleton argues that:

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<sup>33</sup> Fisher, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Fisher, ‘What Is Hauntology?’, 16.

“Derrida is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is, for him, ultimately a political practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that, a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force.”<sup>35</sup> Through deconstruction, the broader effects of language and the unconscious are considered and reworked into the theory, with Eagleton arguing further that Derrida “[i]s not seeking, absurdly, to deny the existence of relatively determinate truths, meanings, identities, intentions, historical continuities; he is seeking rather to see such things as the effects of a wider and deeper history - of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices.” Deconstruction has never been about endless relativism, but a way in which to challenge the idea that language can express a ultimate, outside reality that is not interfered with by the language itself. Derrida's many operators all serve this function of dismantling faith in logic and the entire enlightenment ideal of pure reason. The specter, for instance, serves this function and resembles Breton's emphasis on the unconscious as the way towards proper knowledge in the absence of concern for taste and morals. Breton, as an avant-gardist, is unmistakably out to do more than turn Freudian psychoanalysis into a literary aesthetic. Like automatism, deconstruction is a political practice from which to undermine faith in leading institutions and political structures.

Moving to tradition, any poet is bound to be influenced in some way by what came before, and the concept of a haunting enlightens one of the ways in which that dynamic works when a poet is ahead of the times. How poets engage with earlier traditions varies widely: T.S. Eliot, for instance, who, like Breton, is a poet-critic, suggests in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that the poet should be nothing but a passive channel from which the entire western canon may flow through a mind that has surrendered all of its own idiosyncrasies.<sup>36</sup> The other extreme position is taken by Breton, who does not care about tradition, taste or morals and predominantly wants to engage with the unconscious. The obvious critique for both of these positions is just how applicable they are. Can one channel the entire literary

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<sup>35</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction ; with a New Preface* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 128.

<sup>36</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36–42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1567048>.

canon? Is it possible to surrender entirely to the unconscious? What makes the question of influence such a pressing one regarding AG literature is that it is, as Perloff writes, "by definition, ahead of its time."<sup>37</sup> By being ahead of its time, the relationship to past literary achievements is more complicated than with other kinds of writings.

One of the more influential studies on those relationships is Harold Bloom's Freudian interpretation. For Bloom, poets are inspired to write poetry by reading other poets, but as they begin the act of writing, they are anxious about that influence and fear that they might write in a way that is too similar to the writers they admire. He calls this *The Anxiety of Influence* and endeavors to explain poets' relationship with their precursors through six revisionary ratios.<sup>38</sup> However, none of Bloom's ratios explain how a poem might be ahead of its time or how, if we follow Breton, the question of influence works when one surrenders completely to the unconscious. Here again, the specter becomes interesting: perhaps the best way to understand how influence works in Surrealism is by the presence of the past that continually interferes with the (automatic) writing process that does not actively attempt to engage with any literary behemoths.

When it comes to style, hauntology is a fitting description of Surrealism's movement into the memories of its subjects. Breton's book *Nadja*, which contemplates Surrealist principles bring in the question of haunting in the first sentences: "Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I "haunt."<sup>39</sup> The Surrealist aesthetic depends on representations of memories and the presence of the past to the point where specters become the shaping quality of what has been drawn out as the Surrealist aesthetic so far. However, that engagement also reveals the limits of

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<sup>37</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry', *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, no. 103 (2005): 117.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 11; The proverb he refers to, mainly used in French, is: 'dis-moi qui tu hantes, je te dirai qui tu es.' The title of this thesis is the English translation of that proverb.

automatism and the need for a later AG writers to engage with those specters differently. The way forward for the avant-garde thus requires a change in style and technique.

This chapter has throughout challenged Bürger's claim that Surrealism and Dada have no style. Similarly, since Derrida attacks logocentrism and deconstruction is such a large project, he is hesitant to reduce deconstruction to a mere method. Richard Beardsworth explains this maneuvering, arguing that Derrida avoids the term method "because it carries connotations of a procedural form of judgment. A thinker with a method has already decided *how* to proceed, is unable to give him or herself up to the matter of thought in hand, is a functionary of the criteria which structure his or her conceptual gestures." And that this way of proceeding "is irresponsibility itself."<sup>40</sup> Deconstruction attacks logocentrism, so adapting it as a method from which to proceed goes against the very fabric of its essence, as judgment is already cast. Nonetheless, Beardsworth goes on to argue for a kind of "method" and justifies this by arguing that his "use of the term 'method' is contextually determined and strategic, motivated by a wish to press home the precise intellectual stakes of Derrida's philosophy" and that "the term 'method' underscores the necessity of reinscribing the metaphysical opposition between the transcendental and the empirical."<sup>41</sup> If one wants to make any progress with Derrida at all, some concept of a method is needed. The method in this thesis is using deconstruction to illuminate the aesthetics of a style that wants to deny itself that label initially and reveal who is, and is not, part of the real vanguard.

### 1.3 Will the Real Vanguard Please Stand up?

The question remains: who is it, after the historical avant-gardes, that gets to keep that identity? Exactly what the term means is disputed, and critics seldom agree about who is or is not AG. Peter Bürger, as discussed earlier, does not think that anything after Surrealism is AG. Others, such as David Lehman, expand the term but also closes it off: In his book, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, he uses a title that makes it explicit that there is no AG after the so-called "New York" school of poets. Perloff takes issue with Lehman's book, writing: "As for Lehman's term "last avant-garde," many critics, myself

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Beardsworth, 5.



included, have objected strenuously to the word "last," whose foreclosure of all further innovation is designed as a thinly veiled attack on Language poetry."<sup>42</sup> Regardless of whether or not Lehman is criticizing Language writing, it is clear that critics are usually cautious about labeling something AG. The term "avant-garde," when used to describe anything after Surrealism, is met with opposition, hesitations, or outright hostility. So why does this term spark such strong reactions from critics and writers, and can we even begin to agree about what the term means?

The debate about who gets to be or does not get to be AG is partly due to the immense expectations and severe responsibility that comes with it. "Avant-garde" originated as a military term: the band of brothers on the frontline of the war, spearheading the legion. As an artistic term, AG refers then to new, radical, perilous, and groundbreaking literary and artistic achievements. However, despite its etymology – a vanguard, by definition, consists of more than one person – Perloff is unenthusiastic about the notion that the AG inevitably needs to be associated with group formations. For instance, with the case of Gertrude Stein, whom she describes as "the most radical American writer of the early twentieth century" who nonetheless "disliked literary movements, belonged to no cenacle [literary clique], and participated in no group manifestos or activities." Stein, whose importance in the American AG tradition is rivaled perhaps only by Ezra Pound, would be left out in many classifications of the AG. As such, Perloff suggests that "The dialectic between individual artist and avant-garde groups is seminal to twentieth-century art-making. But not every "movement" is an avant-garde, and not every avant-garde poet or artist is associated with a movement."<sup>43</sup> Beginning with "movements" is ill-advised, as many writers and artists who fall under that category – such as Marcel Duchamp in the visual arts and Stein in literature – did not belong to any artistic faction. Whereas critics such as Bürger discuss group formations exclusively, Perloff is more hesitant and initially problematizes such a collective approach. As Perloff states, who gets to be AG cannot be limited solely to group formations. In the years after the historical AG movements, individual writers might be the only type that fits into that category.

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<sup>42</sup> Perloff, 'Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry', 121.

<sup>43</sup> Perloff, 118.

Yet, whereas the historical avant-gardes were mostly a European phenomenon, with the American writers associated with those movements located in Paris, that would change after the Second World War. Andre Breton, and several other prominent Dadaist and Surrealist emigrated to the United States, and slowly the world center for culture and artistic innovation began to shift from Paris to New York. In painting, this development was seen with the advent of abstract expressionism, and the closely related group of poets we generally refer to as the New York School – the “painterly” poets that includes John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara. Diana Crane examined the transformation of the avant-garde and noted the ambiguousness the term began to possess, writing that: “In the last one hundred and fifty years, since the concept first began to be used, members of different art movements have defined it in a variety of different ways.”<sup>44</sup> Crane writes specifically about the art world – that is, mostly visual art and not literature – in New York from the 1940’s to the 80’s. Along the way, she attempts to bring some clarity to the term AG and posits that to classify for that definition “each new art movement redefines some aspect of the aesthetic content of art, the social content of art, or the norms surrounding the production and distribution of artworks.”<sup>45</sup> Bürger eloquently demonstrated the ways in which the historical AG redefined the social content of art and, to a lesser extent, the production and distribution of art. Moreover, Crane specifically considers the aesthetic content of art, whose existence Bürger denies initially, and consequently, her understanding of the term AG is much broader. Regarding American AG poetry, the poets redefine the medium primarily through aesthetic practices and, secondary, the social content.

To accomplish that change, AG poetry must engage with past literary and intellectual traditions in a new manner, since by being “ahead of its time,” it demands a change in approach due to its difference from poetry prior. Although the AG is ahead of its time, whatever is happening in the world and what has come before inevitably impacts the literary production of any given age, so the type of disconnection from the past that Breton advocated seems suspect. The question of *influence* is not always the best question to ask to comprehend

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<sup>44</sup> Diana Crane, ‘The Transformation of the Avant-Garde : The New York Art World, 1940-1985’ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 11.

<sup>45</sup> Crane, 14.

a complex poem: if we find that Auden and Stevens extensively influence John Ashbery, what does that add to our reading? Is it not just as possible for that manner of investigation to be restraining for us, recognizing only Stevens and not Rimbaud or Williams? The drawback with disregarding influence when writing about the AG originates with its defining feature: being ahead of its time. We cannot foresee the future, only look back towards the past. We can examine earlier writers and attempt to understand if and how this novel or that poem in some way foreshadowed trends to come. However, that would then include all sorts of writers who, in one way or another, managed to get at something which was to become widespread at a later point.

What makes the specific AG advance unlike other types of innovation is not that it foretells artistic tendencies in store but that its style and methods of producing a piece of art or literature require a shift in how we initially understand that medium. Taking poetry, for instance, which this thesis deals with, an AG poem is not a poem that created or foresaw trends (although that indeed happens); what makes it worthy of that definition is that it requires the reader to radically alter how he reads, understand, and relates to poetry initially. Hauntology is related to these changes in reading practices because by changing how we engage with art and literature; we alter our understanding of a whole range of concepts and ideas and as such break the stagnation in imagination the future. As Fisher argues, since we borrow earlier understandings of the future, the vision we possess of the future in the present is stagnant and retrograde. The task of the AG, then, is to break this stagnation and thus be ahead of its time.

This chapter began by describing earlier theories of the AG, the aesthetics of Surrealism, its relationship to developments within the philosophy of language and arguing that Surrealism and deconstruction need to be understood together. It went on to suggest that that the avant-garde is not historical, but persists and continually reinvents itself, and in order to understand that development we need to turn our attention to later poets such as John Ashbery.

## 2. The Polyphonic Self-Portrait: John Ashbery and Surrealism

While John Ashbery is associated with the New York School – which David Lehman termed “The Last Avant-Garde” – his legacy is due in no small part to the praise from Harold Bloom. However, the ways in which Bloom identified Ashbery as the next great American poet carrying on the legacy of Wallace Stevens shaped the discourse initially in such a way to diminish his influences from the avant-gardes. Just as Bloom finds many of Ashbery’s poems to be “strong,” the work that asserts a more radical AG style, such as *The Tennis Court Oath*, is for Bloom nothing more than “calculated incoherence.”<sup>46</sup> Bloom is interested primarily in literary traditions and, especially, influence. The genealogy Bloom writes for Ashbery starts with, not Rimbaud as Perloff would have it, but with Wallace Stevens:

Ashbery goes back through Stevens to Whitman, even as Ammons is a more direct descendant of American Romanticism in its major formulation, which remains Emerson's. Otherwise, these two superb poets have nothing in common except their authentic difficulty. Ammons belongs to no school, while Ashbery can be regarded either as the best poet by far of the "New York School" or - as I would argue - so unique a figure that only confusion is engendered by associating him with Koch, O'Hara, Schuyler, and their friends and disciples.

For Bloom, Ashbery is not only part of the American tradition that goes back to Whitman, but he is also “at his best when he is neither re-vitalizing proverbial wisdom nor barely evading an ellipsis, but when he dares to write most directly in the idiom of Stevens.”<sup>47</sup> Bloom establishes both a Stevensian genealogy and claims that whenever Ashbery attempts to step away from this lineage, he is at his weakest.

Bloom then reads Ashbery’s influences quite differently from Perloff, who emphasizes the French connection over the influence of Stevens. Susan Schultz comments on Bloom’s efforts to make Ashbery fit into his established genealogy as an aim “to correct Ashbery's

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<sup>46</sup> Harold Bloom, ‘John Ashbery: The Charity of The Hard Moments’, *Salmagundi*, no. 22/23 (1973): 107.

<sup>47</sup> Bloom, 105.

attempts to position himself in ways different from Bloom's."<sup>48</sup> Bloom's readings of Ashbery's poetry either ignore or outright reject their radical avant-gardiste assertions. Needless to say, even if there are Surrealist elements in Ashbery's works, Bloom is quick to dismiss them as "nonsense." Bloom even compares the reception of Ashbery with Stevens, advocating that: "Even as Stevens provoked a critical nonsense, only now vanishing, of somehow being a French poet writing in English, so Ashbery still provokes such nonsense. Both are massive sufferers from the anxiety-of-influence, and both developed only when they directly engaged with their American precursor."<sup>49</sup> In addition to being another attempt to correct, Bloom reads both Ashbery and Stevens as developing only when they acknowledge and attempt to advance the legacy that he has established for them. Perhaps, even though Ashbery spent over a decade living in Paris and translated several different French (AG) poets to English, it is ridiculous to claim that he is, in truth, a French poet. Nonetheless, rejecting that influence altogether, as producing anything other than "calculated incoherence," seems to be Bloom cherry-picking which legacy Ashbery should carry on and which should be left behind. Bloom's Romantic tradition might be compared directly with others, such as Perloff, with Schultz reading Bloom's canon as moving "from Emerson to Whitman to Stevens, not from Eliot and Pound to Charles Olson and Charles Bernstein, as many critics-notably Marjorie Perloff and Jerome J. McGann-would have it."<sup>50</sup> Since this thesis is concerned with the specifically Surrealist qualities of Ashbery's work, Perloff's work is more advantageous of a theory than Bloom's, and the following sections will discuss those assets.

John Ashbery's demanding style has led to him being associated with Surrealism or branded as an out-and-out practitioner. David Sweet considers Ashbery's affiliation to Surrealism, claiming that Ashbery questions the validity and utility of automatic writing, and as a consequence, "is really arguing for an expanded notion of the Avant-Garde and avant-garde procedures that no longer need conform (if they ever did) to the law of radical

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<sup>48</sup> Susan M. Schultz, "Returning to Bloom": John Ashbery's Critique of Harold Bloom', *Contemporary Literature* 37, no. 1 (1996): 29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208749>.

<sup>49</sup> Bloom, 'John Ashbery', 113.

<sup>50</sup> Schultz, 'Returning to Bloom', 26-27.

spontaneity in all its heroic pomposity.”<sup>51</sup> While Ashbery writes in a style reminiscent of Surrealism, what distinguishes his poems from being merely an outgrown Surrealism is that he does not accept the assumptions that Breton makes about the ability psychic automatism has to express the “actual functioning of thought.” An Ashbery poem does not conform to, nor is based upon, the principles of automatic writing. Yet, both Breton and Ashbery engage with representations of the unconscious, memories and the problems of language.

Ashbery's style adapts the Surrealists' concern with the function of language but turns his attention towards a greater sense of community. One poem which exemplifies Ashbery's avant-gardiste assertions is the opening poem of his hallmark collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, which parodies Rimbaud's “The Drunken Boat”: “As One Put Drunk Into the Packet Boat,”

I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free.  
Elsewhere we are as sitting in a place where sunlight  
Filters down, a little at a time,  
Waiting for someone to come. Harsh words are spoken,  
As the Sun yellows the green of the maple tree....<sup>52</sup>

Even though Bloom considers *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* one of Ashbery's strongest collections, Ashbery has far from left his AG influences behind. The poem's first stanza exemplifies Ashbery's shifting and unstable use of pronouns. We are initially presented with a lyric I, which “tried each ting,” but it's the plural “we” who are the ones sitting and waiting for “someone.” These pronouns appear in very few lines, and we have no idea to whom any of these pronouns refer. In an interview, Ashbery comments on his use of personal pronouns, saying that they “often seem to be like variables in an equation. “You” can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can “he” and “she” for that matter and “we.”” Ashbery uses this choir of pronouns to have multiple people all be part of the

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<sup>51</sup> David Sweet, ““And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name”: John Ashbery, the Plastic Arts, and the Avant-Garde”, *Comparative Literature* 50, no. 4 (1998): 318, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1771527>.

<sup>52</sup> John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 1–3.

same “consciousness giving rise to the poem,” which “helps to to produce a kind of polyphon[y].”<sup>53</sup>

When Ashbery says that he wants a communal consciousness to be the voice in the poem, he suggests a type of offset Surrealism that accentuates collective consciousnesses rather than individualism. Ashbery likes to move from one person to another, and of course, as a writer, he has the freedom to write as whomever he pleases. It's a romantic idea of collecting all sorts of people and their thoughts and feelings into a single mind. However, unfortunately, that is not how writing works, and any poet inevitably is left alone with only his own mind to guide him. What Ashbery does with his pronouns then is create the impression of a polyphony that challenges us as readers to reconsider who is speaking, who is doing what to whom, and exactly what the relationship is between individual and group consciousness.

Ashbery accomplishes a greater sense of community than the Surrealists were able to in their poetry which was so occupied with the individual mind. Ashbery, through his pronouns, attempts to break down these oppositions of different minds working on their own and, consequently, puts into question the idea of individuality altogether. For instance, the third stanza comments on the problems of perception:

A look of glass stops you  
And you walk on shaken: was I the perceived?  
Did they notice me, this time, as I am,  
Or is it postponed again[?]

Who is the “you”? What does it mean to be perceived as you are? Like Derrida’s questioning of logocentrism, Ashbery questions the idea of a true self, or what we might call the transcendental self. Ashbery’s occupation with identifying a “true self” and the problem of perception is not limited to *Self-Portrait* but is a recurring theme throughout his work. This pursuit is illustrated also in the first poem of *Some Trees*, “Two Scenes,” which opens with the inexplicable lines:

We see us as we truly behave:  
From every corner comes a distinctive offering.

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<sup>53</sup> Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, “Craft Interview with John Ashbery,” *New York Quarterly*, 9 (Winter 1972), 24-25. Quoted in Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 258.

The train comes bearing joy;  
The sparks it strikes illuminate the table.<sup>54</sup>

Along with accomplishing a greater sense of community through his concern with manipulating language, Ashbery questions the idea of objective truths altogether. To see oneself as one truly behaves is realistically impossible and, consequently, questions whether there is any essential true self prior to language and perception.

We can also locate Surrealism's influence in Ashbery's poetic landscapes, which only seem to go together in a dream logic:

The prevalence of those gray flakes falling?  
They are sun motes. You have slept in the Sun  
Longer than the sphinx, and are none the wiser for it.  
Come in. And I thought a shadow fell across the door  
But it was only her come to ask once more  
If I was coming in, and not to hurry in case I wasn't.

Through the unexplained pronoun determinations, Ashbery defamiliarizes the idea of the self and act of looking: who we truly are or how we truly behave. It's indeterminate since we cannot determine which pronouns refer to who. It is clear enough that we might recognize some person on a summer's day reflecting on the harshness of summer and its many demands, emphasized by the closing remarks: "The summer demands and takes away too much, / But night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes." The indeterminate language works as it defamiliarizes the pleasures of the summer but resists any transcendental meaning.

Along with Perloff's "indeterminacy," a wide range of other terms serve a similar function, the most general unspecified term arguably being "ambiguity." Although Anna Balakin suggests that the term ambiguity "is itself ambiguous" and that: "The ambiguity of Mallarmé, which was to be passed on to Breton and to a few other surrealists is a systematic construction of associations of words which interplay, which create different states of meanings in synchronized structure, begin a series and suggest to the reader, through clues,

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<sup>54</sup> John Ashbery, *Some Trees* (New York: Corinth Books, 1970), 9.



how to continue the scale.”<sup>55</sup> In "As One Put Drunk," there is only the close association of words, similar enough to suggest similarity or a coherent idea, but those connections are never truly realized. The reader's task then becomes to suggest where to take this further. This type of association is found throughout Ashbery and is due in no small part to him being such a widely analyzed poet who divides readers and critics so widely. Since the connections are only suggestive, and Ashbery is notoriously hesitant to make any comments to clarify his poems, the open-endedness breeds various interpretations. Then, this distinct feature of a synchronized structure is reminiscent of Rimbaud and the type of ambiguity that Breton inherited from Mallarmé and combined with Freudian psychoanalysis to create psychic automatism.

Like determining who is speaking, connecting the images requires an approach that sees the poem's language as a system of signs with its own semiological relationships. An Ashbery poem seems to exist in its own realm: entirely removed from reference to the material world. Unlike Frank O'Hara, who tries to connect his poems to the real world all the time through Whitmanesque cataloging of New York locations, close friends, other poets, and movie stars, Ashbery's poem establishes a landscape removed from outside reference. When writing about "These Lacustrine Cities," Perloff describes Ashbery's verbal landscape as consisting of "fragmented images" that "appear one by one — cities, sky, swans, tapering branches, violent sea, desert, mountain—without coalescing into a symbolic network." The imageries in an Ashbery poem do not come together in the style of Symbolism but rather as a series of juxtapositions that form in conjunction a landscape primarily reminiscent of a dream or vision. Perloff reads the same poem as being "framed as a series of synecdoche's, but Ashbery's are not, in the words of Wallace Stevens' title, "Parts of a World." For there seems to be no world, no whole to which these parts may be said to belong." To which world do the parts of "As One Put Drunk Into the Packet Boat" and "Two Scenes" belong?

To understand how those images come together we need to consider how Ashbery creates a landscape different from the symbolist mode. Symbolism is characterized by a

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<sup>55</sup> Anna Balakian, 'From Mallarmé to Breton: Continuity and Discontinuity in the Poetics of Ambiguity', in *Writing in a Modern Temper: Essays on French Literature and Thought in Honor of Henri Peyre*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, v. 33 (Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1984), 122.

search for an expression that, through implications by way of complex imagery, is able to symbolize something outside the text itself, with Baudelaire's "Correspondences" the *Ars Poetica* of that coming generation of French poets. Ashbery's poem "As one Put Drunk" initially appears to possess those same qualities through his extensive use of poetic imagery. It is visual: "sitting in a place where sunlight / Filters down," auditory: "Harsh words are spoken," olfactory: "I felt the stirrings of new breath in the pages / Which all winter long had smelled like an old catalogue," and tactile: "A look of glass stops you / And you walk on shaken: was I the perceived?". Yet, these images don't seem to connect in any obvious sense to the outside world. Instead, the images refer back to each other, not in a symbolic unity but through juxtaposition. Like the "fragmented images" in "These Lacustrine Cities," "As one Put Drunk" is organized around a series of fragmented sensory experiences which, unlike in symbolism, does not signify anything outside the text.

"As one Put Drunk" appears to recall an event, and one of the ways Ashbery engages with memories and the unconscious is through his style, which defamiliarizes language. Jody Norton suggests that Ashbery "not only writes poetry as metalanguage — a language "about" language, but he also writes a poetic language that reflects the problems of language in an artistic way, which serves as an eloquent example of the problematic relation between language and intention or reality."<sup>56</sup> The relationship between language and reality was a hallmark of Surrealism and the attempts at revealing *how* we think. However, it is also part of the connection between Ashbery and deconstruction. David Spurr attempts to bridge the gap between theory and poetry, connecting Derrida to Ashbery by describing how

The conventional hierarchical distinction between language and reality, or between the signifier and the signified, has come under attack by language theoreticians such as Heidegger and Derrida. An awareness of the assumptions underlying such a distinction enables us to define one of the important ways in which Ashbery's poetry departs from its Romantic and Modernist antecedents. For Ashbery's poetry calls forth a notion of language as an infinite series of gestures tied to each other as a system of arbitrary signs, yet connected to no external, extra-linguistic reality. Ashbery represents

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<sup>56</sup> Jody Norton, "Whispers out of Time": The Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John

Ashbery', *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 3 (1995): 180,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/441853>.

language as constitutive rather than reflective of reality, implying a collapse of the ordinary hierarchical distinction between signifier and signified.<sup>57</sup>

This system of gestures with no external reality is evident in the poems discussed so far and is indeed the most direct connection between deconstruction and the language Ashbery uses. Moreover, since Ashbery's language also reflects that of Surrealism, the two need to be understood together. As discussed, Derrida's mistrust of language echoes the theories of the Surrealists, and, as Norton argues, we cannot understand Ashbery "outside the context of contemporary philosophy of language, and especially the work of Heidegger, Derrida, and Wittgenstein."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Ashbery is also part of an ongoing AG tradition closest to Surrealism. Yet, Ashbery's style interrogates not only language and subjectivity but the validity of memories, the act of remembering, and the language for describing those processes, which is primarily reminiscent of Surrealism's attempts to uncover the repressed parts of our psyche.

Those repressed parts become stylized in Ashbery as what he terms in his long poem "The Skaters" "this leaving out business," which is how Ashbery engages with fragmented memories. So far, we have dealt with fragmented images and sensory experiences, but Ashbery's fragments can be virtually anything. "The Skaters" is also metapoetic, dealing with the technique of writing itself:

A description of the blues. Labels on bottles  
 And all kinds of discarded objects that ought to be described.  
 But can one ever be sure of which ones?  
 Isn't this a death-trap, wanting to put too much in  
 So the floor sags, as under the weight of a piano,  
           or a piano-legged girl  
 And the whole house of cards comes dinning down around  
           one's ears!<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> David Spurr, 'John Ashbery's Poetry Of Language', *The Centennial Review* 25, no. 2 (1981): 152.

<sup>58</sup> Norton, 'Whispers out of Time', 282.

<sup>59</sup> John Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains* (New York: Ecco Press, 1977), 38.

The speaker questions which elements should be included in the poem and which should be left out. How can one be sure which should go in? How can one know if this or that ruins it entirely, causing it to collapse? These moments of poetic contemplation are scattered throughout "The Skaters." The poet seems to come to some kind of conclusion on the question of what to put in his poem:

But this is an important aspect of the question  
Which I am not ready to discuss, am not at all ready to.  
This leaving-out business. On it hinges the very importance  
of what's novel<sup>60</sup>

The leaving-out, what he does not put into the poem, is just as, if not more, crucial than what ends up in it.

Ashbery's technique of leaving the connection between objects only suggested through non-sequiturs draws attention also to Fisher's elaboration on hauntology. The specter is not physically present but nonetheless affects the present. In "The Skaters," moments of poetic contemplation seem to transgress the boundaries of the text in a way most like Gerard Genette's term "metalepsis."<sup>61</sup> However, narratology is challenging to apply to Ashbery's (long) poems because they are so fragmented and disjointed. There is little in the way of a clear narrative to the extent that whether the poem is really "about" skaters is unclear. Nonetheless, the poem shifts between these metapoetic sections in which the connection between author and reader is blurred. As the poem goes on, the speaker appears troubled by past events that interfere with whatever poem he is trying to write, and these movements produce temporal gaps. In one section the speaker expresses himself as a child:

We children are ashamed of our bodies  
But we laugh and, demanded, talk of sex again  
And all is well. The waves of morning harshness  
Float away like coal-gas into the sky.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ashbery, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 234.

<sup>62</sup> Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 34.

Yet as the poem moves forward that childhood has been replaced by nostalgia and loss:

Yet I shall never return to the past, that attic,  
Its sailboats are perhaps more beautiful than these, these  
I am leaning against<sup>63</sup>

The meditation on childhood and the loss of it is, of course, only one of many possible readings of the poem, the point here is simply to suggest some of the ways in which the lack of a clear connection between the different elements of the poem produces a sense of a time that is out of joint.

The friction between the past and the present is apparent in how the speaker keeps going back to his childhood:

Walking among these phenomena that seem familiar  
to me from my earliest childhood.<sup>64</sup>

The phenomena he encounters, which appear to be a range of pastoral elements, are familiar to him from his upbringing. Yet, the many scenes he describes do not seem to go together, and as the poet himself becomes aware, the disjointed sense of time and place is made apparent by the true comfort he finds himself in at the present moment:

In reality of course the middle-class apartment I live in is nothing  
like a desert island.<sup>65</sup>

Discussing "The Skaters," Spurr argues that the power of Ashbery's "poetic language lies in its cumulative effect rather than on the soundness of an "architectural" structure. Ashbery discards familiar rhetorical patterns in favor of language as series." And that "his lines accumulate in a parallel fashion, layer on layer, without seeming to join in the linear manner customary to written texts. His statements or images tend to relate to each other sequentially, but not consequentially."<sup>66</sup> Whatever the events it is that the poet recalls, the poetic effect

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<sup>63</sup> Ashbery, 43–44.

<sup>64</sup> Ashbery, 54.

<sup>65</sup> Ashbery, 56.

<sup>66</sup> Spurr, 'JOHN ASHBERRY'S POETRY OF LANGUAGE,' 150.

they produce has less to do with the consequences they bear on each other than on the sequence they produce.

## 2.1 Specters of Rimbaud

Hauntological engagements with AG literature illuminate not only the ways in which these poets address the persistence of the past and visions of the future but also the act of remembering, reliving, and retelling lived experiences. This reckoning with the past goes back to the Surrealists' attempts to expose the repressed parts of the psyche through automatic writing. While hauntology reveals the presence of past poets in Ashbery's work, it is also part of the theme and broader aesthetic of some of his most recognized poems. Perloff, for example, describes the event in Ashbery's poem "The Other Tradition" as "a kind of Proustian memory poem in which the narrator relives an especially haunting incident, a turning-point, whether real or imaginary, from his past."<sup>67</sup> But what exactly is a "memory poem"? A poem that relives an experience is not necessarily autobiographical, but it nonetheless engages with a real or fictional past. Those engagements with different temporalities produce signifiers that refer beyond the present and into the past and, along the way, touch upon a host of related ideas that all interfere with the act of remembering as the speaker attempts to deal with his past.

By reliving an especially haunting event, the speaker in "The Other Tradition" engages with a trauma, a ghost from his past. Exactly what that event is, as Perloff points out, is tough to establish. The poem, in any case, has a turn in the last of the two stanzas where the temporal aspect changes from a reliving to a retelling:

I still remember  
How they found you, after a dream, in your thimble hat,  
Studious as a butterfly in a parking lot.<sup>68</sup>

At this point, it is needless to say that the "you" and the "I" are not necessarily two different people; the pronouns here mainly accomplish a change of pace, from a direct reliving of the

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<sup>67</sup> Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, 261.

<sup>68</sup> John Ashbery, 'The Other Tradition', in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover (New York: Norton, 1994), 180.

past to a mediation on the event through an – imagined or otherwise – interlocutor. By engaging with this traumatic event, the poem's speaker opens himself up to change, to engage with that past event in a different manner. The present always carries a trace of the past, and trauma interferes aggressively with the present; by attempting to relive this past, the speaker also tries to deal with the consequences of ways the past interferes with the present moment. The last two lines comments on how "They have so much trouble remembering, when your forgetting / Rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night." By altering how he engages with the past, the speaker, in turn, releases the future, as the trace of the past has been dealt with to negate too much harmful interference in the present.

Reliving and retelling a trauma to an interlocutor, as Ashbery appears to do in "The Other Tradition," lends a direct comparison with Freudian psychoanalysis and Surrealism's adaptation of those principles in literary writing. The question then is whether the poem works in any therapeutical sense. Is the speaker cleansed of his past trauma by writing about it? Are we readers exposed to something we identify from our past as particularly haunting? Since the AG is ahead of its time, why does so much of the subject matter deal with the past? The Surrealists and writers like Ashbery write about (real or imaginary) past events to open the future through a revisit to the past. One of those alterations that the Surrealists were the first true exemplar of was engaging directly with an individual's past through automatic writing. What automatism permits, then, is a reimagining of the past through writing; how we grasp our past is defamiliarized and forces us to shift our understanding of those incidents. By engaging differently with the past, AG literature opens the future by changing how we understand the present and the possibilities of the future.

Ashbery engages directly with Rimbaud in "As One Put Drunk Into The Packet Boat," but Rimbaud's presence in Ashbery's canon goes beyond these direct engagements: Rimbaud is not only present in Ashbery's work but haunts him throughout. Perloff has already traced and established this genealogy in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. However, it is possible to take this a step further: Rimbaud not only influences the poets of this tradition, but he also haunts them, interferes with the writing, and is present both as a libertine whose anti-institutionalism influenced the avant-gardes and counterculture, and as a poet whose style and subject matter reflected those views and ways of life. Rimbaud is always-already present in Ashbery's work and might be compared to the lasting influence of Marx. Rimbaud haunts Ashbery just as communism haunts liberalism because, while Ashbery can claim that he has

no idea where his ideas come from or that they are “notes from the air”<sup>69</sup>, the ghost of Rimbaud, like the ghost of Marx, always comes back to haunt. For instance, Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*: “Capitalist societies can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished since the collapse of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back.”<sup>70</sup> Even with the fall of the Berlin Wall signaling a transition where liberal democracy is presented as that there is, to use Margaret Thatcher's phrase, “no alternative,”<sup>71</sup> communism will continue to haunt western democracy. The haunting persists because a ghost may never die; Marxist ideas and methods will always influence and be present in any society. Moreover, since a ghost may never die, a poet is persistently haunted by other writers: Baudelaire is forever present in Rimbaud, Milton in Eliot, etc. This awareness weighs on how we might apprehend influence, but how a poet might be ahead of her time is more challenging to establish. To envision a different future, we must also envision a different past; that is, to engage with the ghosts of our life differently. Both visions of the past and future are always present, and the two inform and interfere with each other. For every lost future, there is a lost past in which that future was presented as a viable possibility: regaining that virtuality requires a different engagement with the past, one which does not repeat already-established forms but demands a different engagement.

One of Ashbery's more recognized poems which appears both intensely haunted and subjected to a variety of interpretations, is the first poem of the much less recognized collection *A Wave*, “At North Farm,” where the first stanza reads:

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,  
At incredible speed, traveling day and night,

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<sup>69</sup> Taken from the title of one of Ashbery's selected volumes: John Ashbery, *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, ‘Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International’, 123.

<sup>71</sup> The slogan associated with Margaret Thatcher, which was modified by Mark Fisher in Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).



Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes.  
 But will he know where to find you,  
 Recognize you when he sees you,  
 Give you the thing he has for you? <sup>72</sup>

The poem has received some critical attention, with Helen Vendler describing it as dealing with mortality and the journey towards death through clichés that "trip so easily on the tongue that we understand this drama to be something "everyone knows": and yet at the same time the paradoxes of drought and abundance, sweetness and menace, dread and longing, warn us that this is an almost unimaginable state of affairs."<sup>73</sup> However, where do these clichés she describes come from? Moreover, why should we be so confident that the figure traveling towards the speaker is personified death and not a savior? And while Forrest Gander has argued that the poem is evocative "of the early Auden, the English Auden, and even the very early stuff of the English Aude[n],<sup>74</sup> and Susan Stewart sees allusions to the *Kalevala*,<sup>75</sup> the poem might just as well read as either haunted by, or as an outright rewrite of, Rimbaud.

While the urgency of the traveling figure lends Vendler to describe him as the "Angel of death," the second stanza's imagery of abundance and ambiguous feelings towards "him" suggests a Messiah-like figure:

Hardly anything grows here,  
 Yet the granaries are bursting with meal,  
 The sacks of meal piled to the rafters.  
 The streams run with sweetness, fattening fish;  
 Birds darken the sky. Is it enough  
 That the dish of milk is set out at night,  
 That we think of him sometimes,  
 Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?

If there is a theme in "At North Farm," it is change: pressing, inevitable change. The plethora of interpretations Ashbery's poems receive is dependent on the language of indeterminacy,

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<sup>72</sup> John Ashbery, *A Wave: Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 1.

<sup>73</sup> Helen Vendler, 'Making It New', accessed 12 May 2022,  
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/06/14/making-it-new/>.

<sup>74</sup> Forrest Gander, 'In Search of John Ashbery', *Boston Review*, August 2007, 41.

<sup>75</sup> Susan Stewart, 'The Last Man', *The American Poetry Review* 17, no. 5 (1988): 16.

and whatever is about to change is ultimately ambiguous. However, the paradoxes and clichés that Vendler reads are crucially not Ashbery's own, as a cliché, by definition, is unoriginal (although it might, as in this case, be used originally). Even if the conditions in the poem are, as Vendler argues, unbearable, the change that is coming to that environment is not necessarily death but might just as well be a Christ-like figure. As a result, "At North Farm" is persistently haunted by Rimbaud and is particularly evocative of the poem "Genie," which describes the journey of a Messiah. Rimbaud's description: "He is affection and the present since he opened the house to foaming winter and the hum of summer[r],"<sup>76</sup> becomes Ashbery's "Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you, / At incredible speed, traveling day and night, / Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes." Furthermore, the urgency of the travel juxtaposed with the ambiguous feelings in "At North Farm" evokes Rimbaud's poem, which Ashbery himself here translated in 2011:

He is love, perfect and reinvented measurement, wonderful and unforeseen reason, and eternity: machine beloved for its fatal qualities. We have all experienced the terror of his yielding and of our own: O enjoyment of our health, surge of our faculties, egoistic affection and passion for him, he who loves us for his infinite life  
And we remember him and he travels. . .

"At North Farm" is reminiscent of Rimbaud's poem in two primary ways. Firstly, the imagery: speed, travel, and urgency, although Ashbery's poem is more indeterminate in identifying the pronouns. Secondly, the paradoxes, which in Ashbery's landscape consist of both a rich harvest and drought, evoke the inherent contradictions in Rimbaud's "Genie". Enid Peschel, who suggests that Rimbaud opens up the concept of Christian charity through several ambiguous interpretations, argues that: "Epitomized in the Genie, Rimbaud's charity implies the fundamentally contradictory qualities of selflessness, transcendence and pride: on the one hand, abnegation; on the other, possession."<sup>77</sup> The Genie, as a figure for charity, is a paradoxical one, which one might relate to with "mixed feelings," and which delivers both bursting granaries and scarcity.

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<sup>76</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, 'Genie', trans. John Ashbery, *Poetry* 198, no. 1 (2011): 39–42.

<sup>77</sup> Enid Rhodes Peschel, 'Ambiguities in Rimbaud's Search for "Charity"', *The French Review* 47, no. 6 (1974): 1091.

The goal of this comparison is to reveal the ways in which earlier writers might haunt a poet because unstable, hauntological time allows for interferences from the past in ways different from stable, normative time. For example, the poem might be a rewriting of Rimbaud, an allusion to him, or the similarities might be wholly accidental, where Ashbery has tried his best to write in the idiom of Stevens or Auden. The point is not which earlier poets Ashbery engages with or what tradition he is part of. Instead, the goal is to demonstrate how Ashbery writes with remnants of earlier poetry, which in the case of "At North Farm" is the clichés, imageries, and paradoxes from Rimbaud's poem. In so doing, we may understand how influence works when a poem is ahead of its time by following a hauntological logic. If Ashbery writes straightforwardly in the idiom of a previous poet, the claim to AG status is brittle. Hauntological time does not recover the past; it describes the ways in which the present is continually obstructed and interfered with by the past. In order to be revolutionary, AG style must consequently engage with the friction between the past and the present rather than the recovery of an earlier style.

In summary, it has been shown from this chapter that although Ashbery writes in a style that is reminiscent of Surrealism, he does not adhere to the principles of automatism and consequently expands the AG in the post-WWII sphere. The style that emerged with this reinvention coincided with developments within deconstruction. Derridean *differance* and Perloff's indeterminacy illustrates how Ashbery constructs poetry as "metalanguage": attentiveness to the nature of the linguistic signifier and the problems of language. One of Derrida's other operators, the specter, and the related concepts of hauntology informs a greater comprehension of Ashbery's style, exemplified in "The Other Tradition," where the past is always-already present and produces friction. In "At North Farm," hauntological time illuminated Ashbery's relationship to earlier poets, using Rimbaud as an example. Lastly, it has been shown that the change in reading practices required to be ahead of one's time- also requires a different encounter with the past. The chapter that follows moves on to consider the ways in which another poet, Lyn Hejinian, demands an alteration in engagements with the medium of poetry but does so in a different manner from Ashbery.

### 3. “Do such questions sound like those of Wittgenstein?” Lyn Hejinian’s Autobiography

In *The Theory of The Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger suggests that the AG is already historical, so by discussing poetry from the fifties to the eighties widely classified as AG, this thesis attempts to reveal the ways in which the AG is, in fact, not historical, but continually requires reinvention. Also, since the argument here is not for any specific genealogy, the pairing of John Ashbery and Lyn Hejinian reveals how AG poets use a style that can both demand a change in reading practices and consequently put into question a range of political and social issues. The logic behind pairing the two goes back to the initial discussion on the term AG in the first chapter of this thesis. John Ashbery is one of the most influential American poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and critics like David Lehman want to see him as part of an AG school. However, while Lehman, as mentioned earlier, closes the term off, many critics disagree, and after the "New York School" and the other loose group formations of that 1940-60s period grouped in retrospect as "The New American Poets,"<sup>78</sup> Language poetry is among the most recognized AG movements.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, Lyn Hejinian, both as a part of the broader movement of Language writing and as an individual poet is a part of an ongoing reinvention of AG techniques. What follows is an account of Hejinian’s style and technique and the ways in which it resembles and differs from Ashbery and the Surrealists. Lastly, this chapter engages with how Hejinian fits into the broader aim of analyzing the term AG and its relevance to American poetry.

Whereas John Ashbery rarely wants to reveal anything about his technique or offer explanations for his work, Lyn Hejinian and other Language writers are open about their poetics and write extensively on the subject. Ashbery's style engages with friction in time, but

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<sup>78</sup> That label is derived from: Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>79</sup> The term "movement" in this context, as discussed in chapter 1.3, is problematic. My use of the word here refers to reception and criticism rather than a commentary on the relationship between individual writers and group formations.

the ways in which the poet accomplishes this is something he neither wants to nor wants to appear as being able to do. Ashbery is notoriously hesitant to explain how he writes his poetry or offer anything other than very general commentary. The hesitancy to explain – or to use Derrida's loathed English word "elaborate" – is another way in which the two are different: For Hejinian, the difference between literary criticism and poetry is blurred, as she writes in the introduction to the collection of essays *The Language of Inquiry*: “In putting together this collection of essays, I have been aware of the fact that they will be read as poetics rather than poetry. But it would be a mistake to regard the poetics represented here as a discourse for which poetry is merely exemplary, one for which poetry stands at a distance, objectified and under scrutiny.”<sup>80</sup> This deconstruction of genre is something that defines Hejinian's work, and in her conceivably most well-known work, *My Life*, the autobiographical genre gets fundamentally reimagined.

Hejinian's autobiography consists of 45 prose poems, each reliving and retelling one year of the poet's life so far, but without constructing a narrative or making clear chronological progressions that we expect from the autobiographical genre. Hilary Clark suggests that *My Life* “recalls, yet importantly resists, the chronological ordering that is traditional to this [autobiography] form. Replacing chronology is an overall numerical structure and an ongoing development by mnemonic techniques of association and repetition of ideas, images and phrases.”<sup>81</sup> The traditional autobiographical form is replaced with a style that favours parataxis: leaving the connections between individual sentences open, ambiguous, and indeterminate. Clark suggests further that “Hejinian specifically shows us how a woman writer remembers when she challenges dominant discursive practices and traditional notions of what is significant and worthy of inclusion in the writing of a life.” Naturally, what is significant about one's life varies greatly from person to person, or even within a family. As Hejinian writes in *My Life*: “There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get

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<sup>80</sup> Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>81</sup> Hilary Clark, 'The Mnemonics of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*,' *Biography* 14, no. 4 (1991): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2010.0367>.

close to the original, or to know “what really happened.”<sup>82</sup> Of course, “what really happened” is subjective. By emphasizing free associations and seemingly obsessive repetitions, Hejinian challenges the traditional autobiographical genre and how that genre portrays the act of remembering and the construction of identity.

The ways in which Hejinian problematizes language and memories are by adjusting both to undermine patriarchal ways of thinking and remembering. Women and men do not always remember in the same ways, or perhaps more accurately, frame and emphasize the same parts of their life stories. For example, in interviewing elderly men and women who had migrated between the two World Wars, Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame observed some differences between male and female informants, observing that men “make heavy use of the pronoun “I,” framing their life stories as sequences of deliberate actions embodying the “rational pursuit of well-defined goals” by individuals who are, so to speak, the essential actors in their own storie[s].” In contrast, the female participants tend to subdue the “I” in favor of emphasizing relationships.<sup>83</sup> In *My life*, Hejinian contemplates relationships throughout, the early poems dealing with her parents and grandparents, and then later with the author’s children. While Perloff argues that “Hejinian’s strategy is to create a language field that could be anybody’s autobiography, a kind of collective unconscious whose language we all recognize,”<sup>84</sup> Hejinian does not appear to suggest a type of collective memory as the basis for her autobiography – or give the impression of a polyphony, to use Ashbery’s term – but instead challenges the idea of a chronological, stable life of a coherent actor with a clear goal.

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<sup>82</sup> Lyn Hejinian, *My Life: And, My Life in the Nineties* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 16.

<sup>83</sup> Bertaux-Wiame, Isabelle. “The Life History Approach to the Study of Internal Migration.” In Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2007), 131.

<sup>84</sup> Marjorie Perloff, ‘The Word as Such: L = A = N = G=U = A = G=E Poetry in the Eighties’, in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 221.

By disregarding chronological progression within each poem, Hejinian subdues the idea of a rational, individual actor and even claims that: "What follows a strict chronology has no memory."<sup>85</sup> Against this statement, Bertaux-Wiame has observed that a male informant would often "tell the story of his life with a concern for chronological accuracy," yet would constantly require help from the wife: "For it is she, rather than him, who holds the family memory for dates – a memory nourished by innumerable stimulants in familiar objects and surroundings, faces, photographs, and so on."<sup>86</sup> *My life* appears to be less about reconstructing a life story than it is about problematizing the ways in which we frame those narratives initially. Who is a "rational actor," and what is the relationship between individual and group memory? Finally, what role does language play in forming identities and memories, and how do the ways we use language to produce and establish narratives shape our understanding of ourselves and others? The corrections Bertaux-Wiame describes always had the same goal: "[t]o subdue the 'I.' The husband recounts an incident with himself as actor. She [the wife] will retrieve a web of contradictory influences from the surrounding environment within which to place it, and her interventions will quite obviously frustrate her husband in his attempt to reconstruct his life story as the biography of a self-willed individual." This "self-willed individual" is not one we find in *My Life*, where the will or goal of the author is indeterminate and depended on a web of influences. Regarding the relationship between individual and social memory, Hejinian's autobiography recalls: "Thinking back to my childhood, I remember others more clearly than myself, but when I think of more recent times, I begin to dominate my memories. I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time."<sup>87</sup> Whether or not the change from communal memories to self-centered ones is due to nature or nurture is unclear. In any case, by disregarding an authoritative voice of "what really happened," *My life* invites a broader appreciation of collective memories and the ways in which those memories establish relationships.

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<sup>85</sup> Hejinian, *My Life*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> Bertaux-Wiame, Isabelle. "The Life History Approach to the Study of Internal Migration." In Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 132.

<sup>87</sup> Hejinian, *My Life*, 55.

Yet, collective memories are always a source of friction. This friction that arises from recalling and retelling lived experiences has to do with the subjective nature of human experiences. The plethora of versions of similar stories in Hejinian's family imaginably produced some level of friction comparable to the married couples Bertaux-Wiame interviewed. Hejinian suggests in *My Life* that "There is no greater temptation than that of reminiscence."<sup>88</sup> What is tempting about reminiscing beyond nostalgia or the pleasure of recalling fond memories, is the opportunity to frame one's own stories and by extension take agency over one's own life. The act of remembering, then, inevitably produces friction between people as each one has a slightly different memory of "what really happened." The traditional biography is a presented-as authoritative account of one's own life, but in Hejinian's autobiography that self-assured narrative is replaced by a distorted narrative composed of indeterminate free associations.

Through a language of indeterminacy, Hejinian reopens the future by withholding information such as chronological progression and logical connections, and this withholding opens more possibilities than it closes: the language is not non-referential; it merely withholds stable or fixed reference because, as Lyotard wrote, "Complete information means neutralizing more events. What is already known cannot, in principle, be experienced as an event."<sup>89</sup> Capitalist time is about neutralizing unwanted futures, which threatens the market's demand for predictability, and as such capitalist time is stagnant and commodified. Hejinian is a poet who is always thinking about the situation of language in a commodified, capitalist culture. One of the ways she resists this commodification is by continually reworking her material. In "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian comments on this maneuvering in what she calls the "open text":

The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The 'open text' often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus

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<sup>88</sup> Hejinian, 37.

<sup>89</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, 'Time Today', in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, ed. Keith Crome and James Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 271.



resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification.<sup>90</sup>

Independent of what Ashbery or Hejinian says or is concerned with, capitalism is doing something to language and the future. Capitalism wants to commodify the future, and both Ashbery and Hejinian are resisting this commodification. One of the ways in which Hejinian accomplishes this resistance is by bringing the reader into the process through an “open text” that is revised and modified after entering the market.

Another way Hejinian resists commodification is through her non-sequitur sentences which do not follow chronologically but draws attention to Derrida’s operator “the trace”. Since Hejinian's language is constructed around a series of non-sequiturs, the connections between the different sentences remain to be made by the reader, as the author herself makes very few clear associations. Hejinian comments on this in one of the many contemplations on poetics in *My Life*: "I got it from Darwin, Freud and Marx. Not fragments but metonymy. Duration. Language makes tracks."<sup>91</sup> Hejinian's sentences are not fragmented: broken off parts of a whole. Instead, the prose poems draw attention to its own language and the ways in which it leaves a residue. Like Derrida’s trace which refers to the residue or difference from other signs in the decoding of a sign, Hejinian’s sentences make tracks in the ordering of the autobiography. The non-sequiturs make tracks by disregarding logical continuity, bringing the reader into the text to bridge the gap and make the connections. Similarly, Kaplan Harris argues that “A primary goal of early Language poetry was to facilitate a more autonomous, less consumer-oriented reading practice, so narrative structure was discarded in favor of a liberating discontinuity at the level of sound and syntax.”<sup>92</sup> The ways in which Language poetry requires a shift in understanding poetry is by a disjointedness in the language that brings in the reader.

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<sup>90</sup> Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 43.

<sup>91</sup> Hejinian, *My Life*, 49.

<sup>92</sup> Kaplan Page Harris, ‘New Narrative and the Making of Language Poetry’, *American Literature* 81, no. 4 (1 December 2009): 808, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2009-047>.

Like Breton's attempts to reveal how we think, Hejinian attempts to reveal how we remember. Both authors write in a complex AG style, although their techniques vary. For Hejinian, the literary style forms a poetics of protest. Hejinian defamiliarizes how we relate to sentences (and language more broadly) because, as Barthes writes: "The Sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions. Whence its completion: how can a hierarchy remain open?"<sup>93</sup> While Breton and the Surrealists were some of the first to turn their poetics towards the manipulation of language itself, Hejinian also brings into question the hierarchical structures of language. These structures exist both within individual sentences but also in entire genres. David Jarraway argues that "since realism is more fundamentally a kind of naturalization or neutralization of experience framed by ideology, on this issue Hejinian is perhaps focusing her attention on the demystification of memory, or more precisely, on writing as an aid to memory, to paraphrase one of her previous books."<sup>94</sup> By demystifying memory and the genre of autobiography, Hejinian is allowing a much broader range of ideas and experiences to fit into that category. Hejinian explores how we remember and how our memories become languaged, demanding, like Derrida, that we alter how we approach and understand the structures of language.

Hejinian accomplishes this broad change in reading practices through her extensive use of defamiliarization. Juliana Spahr argues that it is easier "to apply to her [Hejinian's] work Viktor Shklovsky's theory of "making strange" than to relate it to most of the contemporary poetry selected for the Norton and Heath anthologies of American literature."<sup>95</sup> Thus, *My Life* draws attention not to "the actual functioning of thought" as Breton did but to the actual functioning of language. For example, Hejinian comments on her use of defamiliarization in *My Life*, writing that "[a]s when one repeats a word or phrase over and

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<sup>93</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 50.

<sup>94</sup> David R. Jarraway, "'My Life' through the Eighties: The Exemplary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E of Lyn Hejinian', *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 2 (1992): 323, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208673>.

<sup>95</sup> Juliana Spahr, 'Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*', *American Literature* 68, no. 1 (1996): 141, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2927544>.

over in order to disintegrate its associations, to defamiliarize i[t]"<sup>96</sup> Hejinian repeats several phrases throughout the book, where the implied meaning is consciously maneuvered to allow for an excess of unstable associations given its varying contexts. Of these repetitions, we find the phrases "I laugh as if my pots were clean" and the Steinian "A pause, a rose, something on paper." Hejinian's technique of defamiliarization, like Derrida's *différance*, accentuates and produces a delay towards arrival at meaning.

Perhaps surprising for work that breaks down an entire genre and requires a plethora of change in the approach to language, *My Life* follows a strict form; The revised version's 45 poems all consist of 45 sentences.<sup>97</sup> Although the genre of the style can be classified both as prose, poetry, and whatever is in between, this thesis deals with them as (prose)poems, which the work declares itself to be: "Of course, this is a poem, that model of inquiry."<sup>98</sup> Hejinian's prose style in the autobiographical genre stylizes time: the parataxis, lacking coordinating conjunctions, destabilizes each sentence. Like Ashbery, Hejinian has moments of *ars poetica* contemplation, and it is hard not to read the sentence "A paragraph is a time and place, not a syntactic unit,"<sup>99</sup> as not a metacommentary on the work itself. Despite the AG qualities described so far, *My Life* both has a style and a rigid form. Hejinian's prose poems are a stylized memory poem, similar to Ashbery's "The Other Tradition" and "The Skaters", but with clear autobiographical intent. Moreover, Hejinian's memory poems defamiliarize experience and the act of remembering, thus subverting the habitual ways we relate to our own lives.

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<sup>96</sup> Hejinian, *My Life*, 98.

<sup>97</sup> The first edition consists of 37 poems with 37 sentences and later added eight new poems and eight new sentences to each of the existing ones.

<sup>98</sup> Hejinian, *My Life*, 90.

<sup>99</sup> Hejinian, 83.

### 3.1 The Future and The Future of the Vanguard

One of the ways in which we may identify Lyn Hejinian with the broader projects of the historical AG movements is through how she challenges structures and institutions. For example, if Language writing is a group formation in the manner of the historical AG's, it is organized radically differently from the Surrealists. In the case of Breton, Alen Friedman argues that the “commitment to anarchy, spontaneity, and the irrational did not prevent him from running the Surrealist group like a political party boss, one with strong misogynistic and homophobic view[s].”<sup>100</sup> These patriarchal figures are absent in Language writing which is composed of individual writers that are loosely associated enough that they do not form an AG in the group-oriented way of the historical movements. Instead, Language writing attacks and confronts notions such as time, progress, the structure of language, and the ways in which they interfere.

But, as Fisher points out, the future has slowly been cancelled in late capitalism, and we may no longer envision any future radically different from the present. Lyotard sees the connection between capitalism and time as one of probability, arguing that “The growth of risk can itself be calculated in terms of probability and in turn translated into monetary terms. Money here appears as what it really is, time stock in view of forestalling what comes about.”<sup>101</sup> The reason for this stagnation is that capitalist time is stable, predictable, and reliant on an already established future. This rational ontology may be directly compared with the hauntological present, which is unstable; the past is always interfering, threatening the ways in which we conduct business, understand ourselves, and frame our narratives. Non-hauntological logic is already known, stagnant, and retrograde so that what we think about the future is fixed. By engaging with a hauntological time in the linear and rigid genre of autobiography, Lyn Hejinian attacks literary institutions which reproduce these artificially present-as-rational stories.

More than just attacking institutions, however, the AG is ahead of its time because it deals with unimaginable futures by reinvestigating how we relate to the past and the present. Nonetheless, reopening the future to different solutions and possibilities than the past is not

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<sup>100</sup> Friedman, *Surreal Beckett*, 25.

<sup>101</sup> Lyotard, ‘Time Today’, 272.

the same as being futuristic, which in part is why this thesis draws upon Surrealism as the AG from which to move forwards rather than, say, the Italian and Russian Futurists. It would be possible to trace the influence from writers like Mayakovsky, even arguing that Hejinian is haunted by Mayakovsky, especially since Hejinian is so occupied with Russian culture and literature as Ashbery is with the French. However, the aim here is not to trace those influences and interferences to establish chronological accuracy regarding who follows who or what the different traditions may be. Instead, the ways in which the past continually interferes with the present and, by extension, the future, in poetry is the subject from which we might understand what it means to be AG. As Hejinian writes in *My Life*: "They used to be the leaders of the avant-garde, but now they just want to be understood, and so farewell to them."<sup>102</sup> Who "they" are in the sentence is difficult to determine. Is the poet referring to fellow Language writers, earlier American movements such as The New York School or the Black Mountain poets, or any historical AG movement? Regardless of who the sentence refers to, it challenges the desire to be understood as a goal since this aspiration consequently denies avant-gardiste assertions. Because, crucially, to be understood is to partake in already-established discourse practices and ways of relating to and understanding language. It is not that AG literature is incomprehensible, but rather that by submitting uncritically to the authority of reference the ability to envision differently vanishes.

Is the avant-garde then, as Bürger would have it, already historical? Or, perhaps, does it exist in a fragmented and unstable time? One of Derrida's repeated phrases in *Specters of Marx* is from *Hamlet*: "The time is out of joint." Hauntological time is out of joint, as specters of the past continue to haunt the present. The AG advance challenges a normative chronology of literary style, technique, and influence by being already in the future. However, this is not to say that AG literature depicts a different future directly. For example, the utopian novels of Kim Stanley Robinson or Ursula K. Le Guin are not AG, even though they offer profound new ways of understanding social structures and the possibilities of the future. Novels such as *Red Mars* or *The Dispossessed* require us to think radically differently about various ideas, from different economic systems to issues of race and gender. However, those novels do not require any noticeable change in reading practices and are innovative primarily in their content, not form, style, or aesthetics. On the other hand, the vanguard advance requires a

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<sup>102</sup> Hejinian, *My Life*, 43.

shift in reading practices, and consequently, those changes question a range of concepts such as narrative structure, consciousness, and social hierarchies.

One of the earliest techniques for this reopening was automatism and not the ultramodern language of the Futurists. For instance, Friedman argues that the Dadaists wanted to distinguish themselves from "Marinetti's Futurism with its veneration of machines, speed, violence, militarism, and proto-fascism" and consequently "denounced and ridiculed both the rottenness of the bourgeois society responsible for the recently concluded Great War and the complicit artists, including themselves, who benefited from and upheld that society."<sup>103</sup> Despite the goal of advancing toward the future, the Futurists upheld institutionalized art. Their compliance with fascism means that whatever future they imagined, it did not attack the bourgeoisie or want to restructure society at any core level. The Italian movement nonetheless spawned another Russian counterpart, and many former Dadaists later became prominent Surrealists. Furthermore, the avant-garde requires continuous reinvention, exemplified by Ezra Pound's "Make it new," whose imagism found its way to William Carlos Williams with the famous phrase "Not ideas but in things." Regarding Pound's mantra, Perloff suggests that he "understood when he abruptly turned away from the Imagism he had invented, [that] once an avant-garde movement has caught on, it is time, in Jasper Johns's words, to do something else."<sup>104</sup> Hejinian even parodies Williams in *My Life*, writing: "No ideas but in potatoes."<sup>105</sup> Because of the need for innovation, an AG might become "historical" faster than other literary movements or tendencies, but that does not mean that the term avant-garde is retrograde or obsolete.

Since this thesis has dealt with poetry from the fifties to the eighties, the cancellation of the future that Fisher discusses concerning music has not yet quite taken place in the same manner. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue for any contemporary AG writing that breaks the current stagnation Fisher describes to be ahead of our own times. Even if the AG is

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<sup>103</sup> Friedman, *Surreal Beckett*, 7.

<sup>104</sup> Perloff, 'Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry', 136.

<sup>105</sup> Hejinian, *My Life*, 59.

not only recognizable in retrospect, it certainly is more manageable. The discussions on the style and technique of Hejinian and Ashbery challenge Bürger's claim that the avant-garde is historical by discussing how two poets from two different "schools" or "movements" alter how we relate to poetry. However, *My Life* and the assortment of Ashbery's poems dealt with are in the past. If anything is apparent at this point, it is the need for a contemporary AG to truly be in the future in ways in which we might, by definition and necessity, not predict.

This chapter began by describing the pairing of John Ashbery with Lyn Hejinian and arguing that, like Ashbery's poetry, Hejinian's *My Life* is part of an ongoing renewal of AG procedures through her fresh approach to autobiography. It went on to suggest that the ways in which Hejinian accomplishes this subversion of genre may be understood through this thesis's most central theories. Perloff's "indeterminacy" and Derrida's "trace" show how Hejinian plays with signifiers, which for her is constructed around the sentence, as opposed to Ashbery's very free verse. The events recalled in *My Life* may be read as an attempt to defamiliarize both those events and the act of remembering itself. Finally, a hauntological logic reveals the ways in which the memories of events in life are subjective, unstable, and continually have the potential to upset the present. The running comparison with Surrealism revealed the similarities and crucial differences between Hejinian and Breton, arguing that the former continues an AG style by upholding and reinvention Breton's concern with the manipulation of language and memories but also brings into question the inherent hierarchies in that language.

## Conclusion

This thesis began with Peter Bürger's definition of the term "avant-garde" but arrived at a different one entirely. Partly, the goal of this argument has been to challenge Bürger and explain the ways in which the term AG has maintained its relevance by using two different poets who innovate and demand a change in approach to understanding poetry. The theoretical framework for understanding that reinvention includes contemporary literary critics such as Marjorie Perloff, the formalist criticism of Viktor Shklovsky, and the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Like Derrida's many operators, however, "defamiliarization" and "indeterminacy" are not stale concepts, and although they have been applied to Ashbery and Hejinian, the two use them widely in different ways. This thesis has principally been about AG style, and those theories unwrap how the poets engage with an aesthetic that needs to be approached in a new manner. Ashbery demands that we shift our understanding of the relationship between individual and group consciousness, the semiological relationship between signs that lack any external, extra-linguistic reality, and the relationship with earlier poetry when a poem is ahead of its time. Finally, Hejinian demands a change in reading practices regarding the entire genre of autobiography and the prose poem; thus, consequently questioning a range of concepts such as the validity of memories, the friction between the past and the present, the ways in which that friction distorts the future, and the role language plays in it all.

This thesis also has a running comparison with Surrealism throughout to show how AG procedures are modified, diverted from, or carried on in the poetry of John Ashbery and Lyn Hejinian. Ashbery rejects automatic writing's grandiose claims yet still attempts to engage with repressed memories, as exemplified best in "The Skaters." Lyn Hejinian also engages with remembrance but turns her attention to the scrutiny of language itself and how language is situated in a commodified capitalist culture. Secondary to style, this thesis attempts to make some comments on the political aspects of the poetry, as was a defining feature of Dada and Surrealism. The significant difference between Ashbery and Hejinian is that the former does not want to discuss poetics outside fragmented moments of contemplation in the poems. In contrast, the latter writes about the topic extensively. Although a reading of Ashbery's poetry with an emphasis on social commentary is possible, it is by far more hidden than Hejinian's poetry and poetics. Nonetheless, both draw from and divert from Surrealism, carrying on an AG tradition.



Finally, hauntology, as the last significant set of ideas and theories, explains the ways in which the AG conforms to Perloff's definition of being ahead of its time. Hauntological logic is unstable, as the past continually interferes with the present. This friction is part of a broader theme, as discussed regarding "The Skaters," "The Other Tradition," and in the entirety of *My Life*. Moreover, regarding influence when a poem is ahead of its time, the concept of a specter exposes how a poet might be haunted by their predecessors, as exemplified in "At North Farm." Conclusively, regarding the political aspects of the poetry, hauntological time discloses how Hejinian challenges the idea that there is any single authoritative way of understanding the past and that any narrative of a life is constructed artificially.

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