

Paweł Marcinkiewicz

ORCID: 0000-0002-7086-1805

University of Opole

pmarcinkiewicz@uni.opole.pl

Daniel Pietrek

ORCID: 0000-0002-1582-6070

University of Opole

dpietrek@uni.opole.pl

## German Romantic Tradition in John Ashbery's *Where Shall I Wander*

**Abstract:** In popular critical and readerly reception, the New York School of poetry was shaped mostly by what Marjorie Perloff calls the tradition of indeterminacy. This was started by Arthur Rimbaud and, a few decades later, developed by Dadaists and Surrealists. Therefore, the tradition of French modernism seems to have been vital for John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, James Schuler, and Barbara Guest, and the poets themselves appeared to confirm this fact. They often visited France privately and as scholars, and lived there for extended periods of time. In the case of John Ashbery, his year-long Fulbright fellowship was prolonged to a decade. Moreover, the New York School poets contributed to the propagation of French literature, being translators, critics and editors of French authors. However, as John Ashbery's late works prove, literary genealogies are far more complex. German Romantic tradition always exerted an important influence on John Ashbery, and it inspired the New York experimenter to contribute two major poems to the twenty-first century American literature: "Where Shall I Wander" and "Hölderlin Marginalia".

**Keywords:** New York School poetry, John Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander*, Caspar Friedrich, Friedrich Hölderlin, German Romanticism

In terms of its philosophical background and thematic scope, as well as the artistic methods it developed, the New York School of poetry—very much like its visual analogue, Abstract Expressionism—was probably the most genuinely American of all the twentieth-century avant-garde movements. John Ashbery's radically democratic character was rooted in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who warned his readers in "American Scholar" against being "subdued" by their "instruments" and advised "[reading] God directly" since books were "for the scholar's

idle times” (44). Moreover, the New York School poets’ attentiveness to the specific world of avant-garde art and its associated artists helped to sustain this community in the alienated American society of the 1950s. Based on the Emerson-Whitman epistemology according to which ideas are true in so far as they help us to develop a satisfactory relationship with other areas of our experience, the pragmatic dimension of Ashbery’s poetry enables the development of a fuller awareness of our own subjectivity and prepares us for the universality of the demands of experience through a radical openness to contingency. In this, Ashbery—and other New York poets—resembled the bohemian avant-garde in Paris championed by Guillaume Apollinaire in the golden period before World War I.

## 1. French roots of the New York School of poetry

For the New York School poets, the Paris-based avant-garde from the first decades of the twentieth-century was an important point of reference. This was because Ashbery and Frank O’Hara strove to transfer the poetics of indeterminacy started by Arthur Rimbaud and anglicized by Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein into the contemporary American idiom. Equally vital was the tradition of surrealism, which had a profound impact on all the New York School poets, particularly in the works of Max Jacob and Raymond Roussel. As Ashbery pointedly observed, “Surrealism has become a part of our daily lives; its effects can be seen everywhere, in the work of artists and writers who have no connection with the movement, in the movies, interior decoration, and popular speech” (*Reported Sightings* 4). Another movement which made French belles-lettres central for the emerging New York literary avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s were the experimenters, belonging to the OuLiPo group, including Raymond Queneau, François Le Lionnais, Marcel Duchamp, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, and Harry Mathews. Finally, the New York School poets were fascinated by the French *nouveau roman* authors, such as Michael Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet, exploring detective fiction for its self-reflective possibilities.

Thus, the New York School poets naturally gravitated towards the sphere of French culture: Kenneth Koch and Ashbery both lived in France as Fulbright scholars, and in the case of Ashbery, his scholarship stay was extended to a ten-year sojourn from 1954 to 1965. O’Hara and Barbara Guest also visited France, particularly Paris, which—in the 1950s and 60s—still preserved much of its early twentieth-century allure for American avant-garde writers and artists.<sup>1</sup> James Schuler visited Paris more or less at the same time: from August 1954 to February 1955 he

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<sup>1</sup> Guest gives a humorous account of her trip to Paris with O’Hara in the summer of 1960: “Frank and I happened to be in Paris at the same time in the summer of 1960. I was staying there with my family and had been very busy with the Guide Bleu looking at every placard on every building I could find ... After lunch I suggested that we cross the street to the ‘bateau lavoir,’ a discovery of mine and one I thought might intrigue Frank. Not at all. He did go across the street, but he didn’t

accompanied the pianist duo Gold & Fizdale on their tour through Germany and France (Wiśniewski 19–20). French influences in O'Hara's and Ashbery's poetry have already been examined by Marjorie Perloff in her pioneering study *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (1977), where the critic claimed that both poets assimilated French Surrealism in "remarkably" different ways (192). In contrast to Perloff, in his meticulous study *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (1994), John Shoptaw has revealed that many French motifs in Ashbery's oeuvre came from much earlier authors. For example, the long poem "Délie, objet de plus haulte vertu" by the French Renaissance poet Maurice Scève became an inspiration for "Fragment"—the final long poem of *The Double Dream of Spring* made of dizains, ten-line stanzas quite unusual in the English literary tradition. Ashbery's devotion to propagating the French literary tradition is reflected by the fact that, in 2014, he published a monumental two-volume 900-page edition of his French translations edited by Eugene Richie and Rosanne Wasserman, *Collected French Translations: Poetry* and *Collected French Translations: Prose*. Moreover, the French government named him both Chevalier of Arts and Letters and Officer of the Legion of Honour.

## 2. German influences in early Ashbery

German influences in Ashbery and other New York poets are less conspicuous. Undoubtedly the German-language symbolists, such as Rainer Maria Rilke, did influence the American avant-garde, in particular providing useful patterns for the improvement of the line as a unit in poetry. This is visible in early James Schuyler, O'Hara, Koch, and Ashbery, who experimented with the poetic line in his second volume, *The Tennis Court Oath*. On top of that, the New York school strove to extend the visual figuration of the literary text. The most radical form of this meaning-generating strategy was developed in Germany by Christian Morgenstern, who in his "Fish's Night Song" abandoned discursive language altogether and used only dashes and brackets. Of course, Ashbery's poems are more than merely "graphic texts", like any significant poetry written in the twentieth century. On the other hand, they do communicate with the reader by their spatial arrangement, resembling objects. For example, the closing gesture of the long poem "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid'" from *Houseboat Days* (1977), graphically resembles a letter, with a salutation and a signature.

In most of his earlier volumes, Ashbery uses references to German-language literature and culture as a part of his eloquent literary discourse, which is intertextual with regard to the Western canon and popular culture in a truly Mannerist

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bother to go into the building. 'Barbara,' he said, 'that was their history and it doesn't interest me. What interests me is ours, and we're making it now'" (77).

way. The long poem “Europe” from Ashbery’s second volume *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) is full of allusions to English anti-German popular fiction from the period of World War II. The collection *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) features the poem “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox”, reworking quotations from Heinrich Heine. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) includes the poem entitled “Märchenbilder”, paraphrasing several German-language fairy tales. However, references to German music and composers are even more frequent in Ashbery’s oeuvre. The long poem “The Skaters” from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) touches on motifs from Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Fidelio*. The long poem “A Wave” from the 1984 collection under the same title alludes to the German violinist Joseph Joachim. Various references to Robert Schumann can be found in a number of Ashbery’s books, including *The Double Dream of Spring* and *Self-Portrait*.

In the 1980s, Ashbery’s poetry started to evolve towards a new compositional plan, each project depending more on the unit of the book to produce its final effect. His poems still contain references to German culture but they are less conspicuous, because the rules of the Ashberian referential game had changed. *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992), *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995), *Wakefulness* (1998), *Girls on the Run* (1999), *Your Name Here* (2000), *As Umbrellas Follow Rain* (2001), and *Chinese Whispers* (2002)—all those books evolve around a single topic or idea, and they should be read as essays on aesthetics, sociology, or philosophy rather than as compilations of miscellaneous texts. Moreover, they are very precisely structured, not only in terms of their content—introducing the reader to their topics in an opening gesture, offering development of the main topic and secondary motifs, and summing up their argument in a closing gesture—but also in terms of their visual appearance as material objects. Ashbery was responsible for choosing their front-cover artwork, and jacket design, as well as their font. This is also true about one of the greatest of Ashbery’s collections from the twenty-first century, *Where Shall I Wander* (2005).

### 3. *Where Shall I Wander* and the tradition of German Romanticism

Stylistically resembling the lucidity of “Self-Portrait”, *Where Shall I Wander* puts to the test strategies of remembering the past and introduces a nostalgic tone of looking back at the speaker’s life—or more accurately, as Daniel E. Pritchard points out—“looking at ‘looking back,’ considering experience of memory and loneliness alongside themes of generational transition” (par. 1). However, more than anything else, *Where Shall I Wander* is a tribute to German Romanticism which haunted many of Ashbery’s previous collections. Obviously, the title alludes to Franz Schubert’s lied “Der Wanderer”, composed in 1816 to the lyric by

Georg Philipp Schmidt von Lübeck, but also, less conspicuously, to Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*, a setting of 24 poems by Wilhelm Müller. Thus, the motifs of a mysterious and risky journey and a travel towards the unknown dominate in Ashbery's volume.

The artwork chosen by the poet for the front cover is Caspar David Friedrich's late painting "The Great Reserve Near Dresden" (1832). Ashbery referred to the icon of the German Romantic movement earlier, in his 2000 volume *Your Name Here*: "The inevitable Caspar David Friedrich painting/ of a ship pointing somehow upward has slipped in like fog,/ surrounding us" (85). The above description seems to correspond to Friedrich's painting "Wreck in the Moonlight" from 1835: its monochromatic outline in sepia shades presents a strip of stony shore and water shimmering with moon beams. In the background, the large and mysterious figure of the eponymous shipwreck looms against a sky covered with fringed clouds illuminated by the moon. The economical precision of the painting brings to mind Alfred Stieglitz's photographs rather than a Romantic painting, loaded with sublime emotions. These features are also visible in "The Great Reserve Near Dresden": the palette is reduced to the shades of brown, yellow, and blue, which produce a photographic effect, evoking Alex Katz's postmodern experiments with landscape, exhibited at the High Museum of Modern Art in Atlanta in 1915. Far-fetched as it might appear at first, the above juxtaposition of Friedrich and Katz is in fact not so extraordinary. According to Theodor W. Adorno, it was Friedrich who started the era of modernism in Germany (qtd. in Begemann 89). The most unusual feature of "The Great Reserve Near Dresden" is its perspective: significantly broader than in the traditional *Landschaftsmalerei*. A German art historian, Willy Wolfradt, calls Friedrich's manner of composition a hyperbolic scheme: the line of horizon serves as a coordinate between two hyperbolic curves, reflecting each other (qtd. in Begemann 89).

Choosing Friedrich's painting for the cover of this volume, Ashbery must have been fascinated by the painter's peculiar vision, but also by his aura of experimenter and freak. Although he enjoyed critical acclaim, his paintings often shocked the public. A good example is the famous "Der Mönch am Meer", which was first presented in Berlin in 1810. When the Prussian King Frederick William IV bought the painting, he was criticized by members of the Academy of Arts in Berlin (Begemann 89). Thus, the cover of *Where Shall I Wander* tries to find the very source for that orientation in art which has cultivated large-scale gestures of refusal. Friedrich serves as a paradigm of an avant-garde artist, first rejected by the audience as insulting, outrageous, or wilfully incomprehensible, and then turned into a classic. On top of that, many poems in the collection seem to be verbal illustrations of Friedrich's paintings, and the personae inhabiting them travel through gloomy moon-lit landscapes. However, Ashbery also plays with the literal meaning of his title: *Where Shall I Wander* by asking important questions about the future fate of the poet and his works.

The opening gesture of the volume is the poem “Ignorance of the Law Is No Excuse”, which describes a journey undertaken by the speaker and his companions to a metaphorical Hades:

We were warned about spiders, and the occasional famine. ...  
 In vineyards where the bee’s hymn drowns the monotony,  
 we slept for peace, joining in the great run. ...  
 We went down gently  
 to the bottom-most step. ...  
 Only beware the bears and wolves that frequent it  
 and the shadow that comes when you expect dawn. (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 1)

The poem’s particulars—“famine”, “vineyards”, “sleeps”, “peace”, “bears”, “wolves”—resemble scraps of a gloomy Romantic dream vision, in which the protagonist’s soul wanders towards a sinister place of suffering, inhabited by “the shadow” appearing at daybreak. The trope of the Romantic journey or travelogues, which has an allegorical undertone, includes such poems as “Involuntary Description”, “Heavy Home”, and “Like Most Seas”. On top of that, Ashbery’s references to Romantic tradition have their ironic dimension—that of a linguistic game or an exercise in archaization, which occurs in a group of poems including “O Fortuna”, “Retro”, and “Capital O”.

The eponymous poem of the collection is a journey into the past of both the speaker’s memory and language. “Where Shall I Wander” belongs to, as Antoine Cazé has it, “[the] summation-poem genre” (par. 3). The seven-page text is placed at the end of the book in the mode of Ashbery’s earlier great collections, which take their titles from their final texts, such as *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* or *A Wave*. Such a procedure gives the volume a sense of direction, the final poem being a recapitulation of the book’s narrative possibilities and major tropes. Formally speaking, “Where Shall I Wander” is a prose poem, comprised of prose blocks of varying length, which are connected with each other by sentences suddenly brought to a halt by a break, passing from one block to the next. This endows the words at the end of blocks with an emotional load and also produces a feeling of metaphorical movement, as if of passing from one moment to the next. Such a technique differs significantly from the poet’s earlier attempts at the prose poem genre. *Three Poems* consisted mostly of separate paragraphs whose correlation was often difficult to grasp. On a semantic level, *Three Poems* was an immensely demanding work, with the gargantuan twists of its one-page sentences and the random shifts of its register bringing to mind the late Henry James and the Gertrude Stein of *Stanzas in Meditation*. David Herd locates the discursive tradition of *Three Poems* in Pascal’s *The Pensées*, which helps to explain the book’s “aspirations and difficulties” as belonging to a “genealogy of spiritually inclined texts linked by their dialogue with [Pascal]” (129). In “Where Shall I Wander”, the discursive ambitions are more modest, the syntactic and stylistic convolutions get straightened out, and the boundless visions take the concrete form of a precisely structured narrative, as if leaving out the earlier totalizing impulse.



The most important Romantic reference here would be the myth of child as a prodigy and prophet, but also as a symbol of innocence. “Where Shall I Wander” is from *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit* by Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *à rebours*. In his autobiography, written between 1811 and 1814, Goethe recollects his adolescent years spent in Frankfurt on Main, where he was born in 1749. In the first volume of the work, the father of German Romanticism tries to give a “true” account of his childhood spent in Frankfurt, describing the splendid edifices reminiscent of its glorious past: Saalhof built on the Castle of Charlemagne and his successors, the Church of St. Bartholomew, the Church of Holy Mary, the Gate of St. Catherine. Ashbery’s goal seems to be quite similar but the American poet does not focus on external reality, but its linguistic trace. The thematic scope of the poem consists of motley representations of the past preserved in various registers of American language, from daily vernacular to scientific jargon. The time span covers the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, which was quite significant for the poet: his parents were born at the end the nineteenth century and he, being born in 1927, grew up in the 1930s and 40s. This particular period of time is reflected in the poem’s language, the stylization of which includes the use of slightly archaized diction. The text is full of old-fashioned hackneyed phrases, for example “darn it” and “sure as heck”; or obsolete French expressions, such as “mine de rien” and “arrière-pensée”. At the level of syntax, there are many subject clauses using the pronoun “it”, which give the narration a depersonalized character. As for historical references, the earliest of these come from the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, which is suggested by a reference to the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and the McKinley assassination in 1901. The most recent originated in the mid-twentieth century, which is signalled by one of the final images in the poem, the “laughing little dog”, alluding to the 1939 novel *Ask the Dust* by John Fante. In Fante’s novel, which is set during the Depression in Los Angeles, the main protagonist, Arturo Bandini, writes a novel, *The Dog Laughed*, which turns out to be a failure.

Technically speaking, the poem is a cut-up or collage presentation in the manner of “Europe” or “Fantasia on the ‘Nut-Brown Maid’”, possibly scaffolded on a number of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sources, which are used for historical references: the relief aid during the Depression, the flooding along Lake Eerie, the invention of the loom’s double keyboard, etc. Parallel to these, there are allusions to children’s literature from the same period: the dog Rusty’s garage is mentioned: “But why talk of housebreaking on a night like this? To one viewer, off in different directions with elaborate casualness, to regroup behind Rusty’s garage ... having conveniently evaporated from the hoary scribe’s all-consuming minutes” (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 77). The dog originally featured in a radio drama by Bess Flynn, *Bachelor’s Children* (1935–36), which was published as a script in 1939. In the 1940s, Columbia Pictures released a series of eight children’s movies, unrelated to the drama, about a group of children and

a dog Rusty. In several fragments, Ashbery's poem seems to play with the motifs from the movie: a group of children or adolescents is involved in a secret plan, which captures the reader's attention. Similarly, the 1878 novel by Louisa May Alcott, *Under the Lilacs*, is evoked: "under her lilacs was a liver fading" (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 79). Also the setting of the following scene vaguely resembles the novel's setting, with the yard where two girls—the main protagonists—play.

Typically of Ashbery's poetry, all the above frames contain autobiographical elements—linguistic, historical, and cultural—which, as Cazé puts it, are rhetorically displaced into the lyrical via the "inscription/encryption of the self and various forms of self-cancellation" (par. 2). The displacement results from the tension between the autobiographical and textual material in images and metaphors. The initial prose blocks contain several descriptions of a house near a lake, which is the poet's home in Sodus, on Lake Eerie, near Rochester:

Conversations at night not meant to be overheard, so you can't tell exactly when you came in, at which second. The interior is meant to be homey upstairs, downstairs, all across the hall, dazzled from the blue microsecond it took to get here, but if then, why? Why the commotion on the shore? Traces of birds in the sand, birdshit, claw marks. And the rest are missing. (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 75)

The precise account of the poet's home is denigrated and denied the ontological grounds of a true account by the very proximity of other discourses—historical and cultural in particular. Here, the inchoateness of individual experience escapes teleology: "To be seen from behind, here is what you have to do. Smear a tongue depressor with a little suet, than stand away, pessimistic as always. The part in your hair will come to seem the natural one. ... You know, you've got to go out, jostle the barometer, bump into the hall tree and excuse yourself" (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 75). "To be seen from behind" implies seeing the future as a form of the past. The speaker, addressing his past self, suggests possibilities and leaves space for guesswork. In other words, the past also contains the negative dimension of experience, all the "stories that were not". The seemingly endless rift between the speaker's present and his past selves, as expressed in the above fragment, seems to get gradually repaired in the course of the poem. The last prose block reads: "You wore your cummerbund with the stars and stripes. I, kilted in lime, held a stethoscope to the head of the parting guest. Together we were a couple forever" (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 81). This is the speaker's reconciliation with his past: at the end of it, or at the beginning, however cranky and improbable, there is a metaphor binding disparate fragments of his experience—his consolidating memory. This is exactly what the great German Romantics—Goethe and Friedrich Schiller—discovered in their poetry: the self depends on memory and the past is the main substance of poetry. After Schiller's death in 1805, Goethe had to cope with depression and other serious health problems, which produced in him the feeling of *Vorbei*: everything which was



important in his life appeared to have gone, and he felt obliged to preserve the past and its memories for future generations (Czarnecka 127).

#### 4. “Hölderlin Marginalia” as a homage to the pre-modernist genius from Tübingen

However, for Ashbery, the most important of the German Romantics seems to be Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), which becomes clear in the context of another long poem in the volume, “Hölderlin Marginalia”. Here, Ashbery uses the Romantic trope of the journey towards the unknown, slightly archaized into nineteenth-century poetic diction, as in the following sentence in the poem’s ending: “[T]he skin/ of the birch/ blown away and within grace/ divided” (*Where Shall I Wander* 22). The title of the poem, of course, directly alludes to the German poet Hölderlin, conventionally classified as a transitional writer belonging to the period between the era of Classicism and Romanticism. The influential *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte* from 1994, edited by Wolfgang Beutin and published by J. B. Metzler Verlag, synthesizes Hölderlin’s epoch as “Kunstepoche” (186). In most contemporary textbooks of German literature, Hölderlin is seen as a genius from Tübingen, who—together with Jean Paul and Heinrich von Kleist—kept himself apart from the mainstream literary scene and did not join any literary groups, choosing an existence on the margins (Beutin 186). In the nineteenth century, however, Hölderlin was practically forgotten, if we do not count Nietzsche’s fascination with his poetry. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the widespread rise of his reputation started thanks to Wilhelm Dilthey and Stefan George, and the circle of writers grouped around the latter, such as Friedrich Gundolf. It was Dilthey who first read and interpreted Hölderlin through the myth of the Romantic genius. Gundolf, on the other hand, promoted the picture of Hölderlin as a sage who was ahead of his time and, therefore, was destined to fail as a writer (Beutin 186).

In the twentieth century, Hölderlin’s reception in Germany was a subject of ideological manipulation. In the 1930s, he was used by the propaganda of the National Socialist German Worker’s Party as a critic of capitalism. After World War II, in the German Democratic Republic, he was presented as a revolutionary artist, due to the utopian concepts used in his poetry, borrowed from Georg Hegel and Friedrich Schelling (Jens 927). In the second half of the twentieth century, German critics stressed Hölderlin’s peculiarity. For example, Jochen Schmidt observes that the genius from Tübingen developed his own specific orthography (283). However, the most valuable praise for Hölderlin comes from Hans Georg Gadamer. In his article published in *Hölderlin-Jahrbuch*, the philosopher recollects the moment when he discovered Hölderlin in the 1920s: instantly, he had a feeling that he was reading a great writer (178–182). Trying to define Hölderlin’s importance in German literature, Gadamer observes that no German writer strove so intently to

find the appropriate word to fit in his works; Hölderlin almost stuttered, due to his inability to fully express his tangled thoughts (178–182).

It seems that the last feature—the immense intensity of poetic expression—might be particularly interesting for Ashbery. The title of his poem also raises a question of the shifting margins of our culture, and the ever changing ratio between the marginal and the central. In this sense, “Hölderlin Marginalia” sounds like an oxymoronic phrase, bringing to mind a “margin of the margin”, an area at the very border of civilization where culture meets non-culture and where metaphors emerge from a primordial chaos. Such a literary stance squares with the philosophical outlooks of theorists of the epistemological limits of thought, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Jean François Lyotard. In “Hölderlin Marginalia”, there are several scenes with the same self in clearly different temporalities, which is marked by varying tonalities of voice. What binds the scenes together is the speaker’s strife against the confines of his existence, imposed by time as well as space. As for its poetics, “Hölderlin Marginalia” is a rhetorical vertigo of brief jagged stanzas, distorting the syntax almost beyond the limits of the poet’s native tongue. The poem is divided graphically into six sections by long continuous lines. Thus, each section visually resembles a grave or a plot in a cemetery. The opening of the poem thrusts the reader directly into a solipsistic flux of atomized sensory experience:

And in the soaking of which,  
or the trunk.  
is gas gas gas gas gas  
of which the room too  
is furnished

always the quaking of relief  
is followed by gold scrub  
piercing of a robot

They came to get you in times of relief as yet unimaginable,  
or imagined—  
circus tigers tip out on the loom, and the  
hand  
still stays.

An unseen servant stocks the kitchen with supplies  
and out pantries are furbished by autumn  
the kettle relinquishes nothing. (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 17)

The introductory “and” suggests an unfolding conversation between indeterminate personae in the spooky world of a horror movie: we are in the nearest proximity of a decomposing body, in a room—or a coffin?—full of possibly virulent gas. “Gold scrub/ piercing of a robot” evokes naturalistic images connected with the post-mortem decomposition of body when robot-like bugs penetrate a corpse. On the surface, this may be read as an example of Ashbery’s gallows humour, but on closer examination we find a series of metaphors with an elegiac undertone, such as “relief as yet unimaginable”, “pantries furbished by autumn”, or

“the room furnished by gas”. The speaker repeats the word “gas” five times, which almost explodes its sense into “guess”, before it sublimates into an abbreviation used to denote a newspaper in the next section: “More gaz and gaz in the openings between the tombs” (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 18). There are further paronomastic chains in the poem: “Lord the lingo of the ingot” (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 17), “try wry irises” (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 18), or “bring dawn yet not yet down” (“Hölderlin Marginalia” 19). According to Kacper Bartczak, Ashbery’s puns are a fitting device for displaying interconnectedness within one cultural field (171). In the first sections of “Hölderlin Marginalia”, they centre around death and decay, hitting on a transcendental note. The reader’s impression is that the speaker wades through a sticky language, making every effort to escape from the plastering fabric of words. This metaphorizes into a poetic liberation from linguistic or physical paradigms, which is the most important trope of the poem.

The image of the tigers “tipping out on the loom” is a very interesting example of tropic intertextuality or metalepsis, invoking Blake’s famous poem, “The Tyger”. An offspring of Blake’s “fiery thought”, the tiger opens a space of unceasing interrogation: either a cousin of Leviathan or a man-made creation, it incorporates primeval chaos, which may figuratively stand for pre-structured perception, free from Urizen’s unmistakable unequivocalty.<sup>2</sup> In Ashbery’s poem, this meaning takes on an ironic spin: “circus tigers” imply tamed and trained animals used in cheap entertainment. The message is clear: metaphors are also pre-packaged products on a cultural scene, and we are cut off from the pure energies of Blakean Imagination. That is why “hand/ still stays”, and nothing can force it to move. The image of the tiger reappears in the final section of the poem, which may point to the futility of circus-like literary practices as a means of grasping reality.

The following stanzas try to recreate the chronicle of the speaker’s development. The dominating tropes of the fourth section are those connected with going away and further decentering:

Then you grow up you grow away from  
not meaning it as tedium—  
everyone has to grow up a little in their life  
a passion, orange,  
platter of roses time will destabilize  
in long or in large, keeps  
still the secret. ...  
[T]ravel all night  
to the respected star  
fall and worship the pebble time left there. (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 19)

<sup>2</sup> I’m referring here to Tadeusz Sławek’s masterly interpretation of Blake’s poetry *U-Bywać. Człowiek, świat, przyjaźń w twórczości Williama Blake’a*, especially to the chapter “Myślenie płomieniste” (173–347).

“Growing up” is likened to travelling in time or being unwillingly pulled through time, and it becomes clear that time is the main barrier separating the speaker from “stability”. “Travelling to the respected star” implies following one’s goal, while “worshipping” the pebble left by time could be read as an act of dissidence against the passage of time. Thus, the “pebble” is a survivor that has managed to escape time’s abyss. This meaning touches on the Stevensian trope of the “rock”, signifying the reification of the past that Ashbery had used in his previous volumes, such as *A Wave*.<sup>3</sup> Further in the section, we have the flotsam and jetsam of past experiences arranged in a cryptic narration about the speaker’s process of maturing: glimpses of different localities, like hotels, are interspersed with the speaker’s attempts to organize his past experiences. In the final sixth section it becomes clear that the “opening” means writing verse—a life-long project, completely absorbing the poet’s energies:

A vast rudeness all at once, blinking like an incredulous ocean  
with its garters down, in the foam chest of thundering ...

There are still other stays to unfasten  
linkage in the teeth of night,  
both lion and tiger.  
We blend in with one another.  
The relief is in the book,  
taken to new extremes,  
to further sights  
in the cause of a new dimension  
growing back from the tree,  
caused briefly  
by someone’s mistake  
now sucked out like venom,  
the tears of materiality, the skin  
of the birch  
blown away and within grace  
divided. (Ashbery, *Where Shall I Wander* 22)

The opening gesture suggests a moment of revelation when reality is demystified. The speaker’s voice emerges from the fury of the elements, unfolding an epiphanic vision of understanding. The speaker’s “blending” with other “opening selves” could be understood as going beyond his distinctiveness towards some collective (or textual) awareness (or community). Thus the process of “opening” is a painstaking surpassing of one’s selfhood. The promise of “relief” is guaranteed by rhetorical figures employed by the poet, with their dazzling inventiveness and masterly accuracy in a word—it is ensured by a lasting form. The above fragment, typically of Ashbery, is autotelic, and it comments on the ongoing process of writing. The poet’s goal is precisely to produce such a book. Only a formally outstanding volume can sooth the pain of being “here” as a fixed identity. However,

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of this trope, see Bartczak 142.

this happens at a price: when reality's randomness is channelled into a form, it becomes divided from its own "openness"—its indeterminacy which the speaker wants to preserve. Hence "the tears of materiality" whose demystification is stressed by the sentimental cliché of the final image of the divided birch.

Ashbery's "Hölderlin Marginalia" deals with the complex relations between reality, experience, time and writing. Time, which finally annuls all experience (or almost all, as was demonstrated in the first section), can be conquered or surpassed by the process of writing, which gathers all experiences and distributes them in a collective and seemingly timeless awareness of community. As for reality, preserving it in writing requires a constant effort on the part of the poet, the result of which remains highly questionable. In respect of the Horatian trope of the immortal poet, Ashbery veers from the German literary tradition that connotes timelessness with artistic greatness. The concept of immortality is more problematic for the American poet: from his perspective, it requires abandoning the notion of the self as well as giving up the concept of writing understood as recapturing reality.

## 5. Final remarks

Most critics—including such eminent figures as Perloff or Herd—perceive American avant-garde of the mid-twentieth century as an offspring of the so-called first modernist avant-garde that swept across most European countries in the 1910s. Then, the strongest modernist artistic impulses came to America from France, Italy, and Russia. However, the indecision of poetic discourse that lies at the core of indeterminacy in the works of the New York School of poets might have had sources other than French symbolism. Ashbery's most prominent collection in the twenty-first century—*Where Shall I Wander*—reveals that literary genealogies are more complex than sequential theories of influence imply. The large-scale fermentation of modernism would not have been possible without the influence of German Romanticism, especially pre-avant-garde artists, such as Friedrich and Hölderlin.

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