Arguably one of the main objectives of any avant-garde movement is to displace fixed literary sites. Indeed, the transgressive achievements of both the historical and the new avant-garde movements reside in their power to generate a crisis in the hackneyed codes of literary practices. The linguistic displacements and ruptures are not, however, as superficial analyses claim, an end in themselves, narcissistic processes of self-reflexivity restricted within the confines of purely aesthetic acts. Literature is conceived as a metalinguistic production of ideologies and is thus able to provoke shifts in conventional perceptions and social paradigms. Literature must contribute to the demolition of hegemonic beliefs and to the unfolding of new cognitive maps. Linguistic forms, as expressions of ideologies, are devised to establish a dialectical relationship with reality. In fact, for avant-garde literature, reality occurs first and foremost in the form of linguistic modalities. In this postulate resides the specificity of literature and the extraordinary power with which the word is charged within the literary space.

However, it must be underscored that avant-garde strategies are not to be identified exclusively with a pars destruens, with the destructive elements or the acts of sabotage carried out against the literary and aesthetic conventions. The avant-garde embodies, at the same time, a pars construens, visionary projects aimed at "changer la vie," as André Breton once said, recalling the words of Marx and Rimbaud. The revolution does not occur in pre-given conceptions and narratives simply transposed into established literary canons, but takes place within the territory of language, the real core of literature.

This essay suggests that the relationship between literature and the avant-garde can be equated to the activities which take place in an ecosystem. Literature, like any environment, is affected by all sorts of pollutants and waste. Worn-out and rotting materials are dumped daily into the literary environment. Just as land subjected to overfarming erodes and becomes arid and infertile so, too, the literary word can easily become overworked and
sterile. As it reaches a state of obsolescence and tumescence, the word is turned into a reified and alienating presence, its power of communication and imagination inevitably lost. The extreme linguistic otherness pursued by the avant-garde represents an attempt to revitalize the literary word by revolting against any sign of decay. The avant-garde's objectives are clearly social and political. As a result, it sets out to map unchartered cartographies of subjectivities both individual and collective. By dislodging conventional forms of writing, it aims to dislodge ossified forms of thought, thus opening the way to innovative cultural and ideological projects.

For any authentic avant-garde movement, literature is a revolutionary act inasmuch as it contests and destroys the ordered system of traditional language. By opposing the normality and the automatism of ordinary communication, it gives voice to difference and throws into question the accepted vision of reality. In its contraposition to the linguistic code, attendant ideologies, and dominant literary models, the verbal revolution (through blasphemous disorder, ambiguitiy, randomness, intense amplification of the polysemic potentialities of the word, the effects of defamiliarization, programmatic laceration and fragmentation of syntax and, in many cases, the lexicon) represents an aesthetics of negation capable of providing a radical perspective on the world. The new destructive form translates itself into new content: the project of formal disorder (as, for instance, in the case of Dadaism, Surrealism, and the new avant-garde movements of the sixties in Italy and France) denounces the false harmonies and reconciling modes of bourgeois writing, the function of which is to conceal alienation and social contradictions. As representatives of the Frankfurt School—Adorno in particular—have contended, the formal dissonance carries within itself a message of dialectical antithesis, the negation of the present system and the utopian desire for a future-oriented alternative.2

However, it is crucial to underscore that the avant-garde—seen as a form of aesthetic imagination that transcends specific movements, a sort of Urgavardigardism—longs for a permanent revolution within the realm of art and literature, in the sense that its protest against atrophied language and repressive conditions never comes to an end. As Artaud emphasized, “We ought after all to be able to see, it is our adulation for what has already been done, however fine and worthy it may be, that fossilises us, makes us stagnate and prevents us contacting that underlying power called thinking energy, vital power” (Artaud 59).

Any authentic expression of the avant-garde demonstrates that there is no possibility of reconciliation with normalized language and established gram-
mals of the world. If the avant-garde assigns to literature a liberating function, inasmuch as it can open up utopian spaces by exposing the negativity of an alienated human existence, it also forcefully rejects any absolute and atemporal discourse of the positive or metahistorical aesthetic models. Avant-garde literature is a temporary event tied to the contingent. As the Futurists declared, “To the conception of the imperishable and the immortal in art, we oppose that of the becoming, the perishable, the transient and the ephemeral” (Marinetti 303). Indeed, the avant-garde’s antithesis reveals a negative dialectic that espouses the vision of a gap between the actual and the potential that cannot be closed. This hiatus, a wound that is impossible to heal, is informed by a view of literature as a nomadic activity and of humanity as an open-ended project. Avant-garde literature constantly expresses a lack, an allegory of absence that can never be completely filled.

The iconoclastic language, on the one hand, aims to subvert literature as an institution and, on the other, endeavours to strip the world of its mythologies and disguises. As has been illustrated by Peter Bürger, the avant-garde advocates concurrently the destruction of art as an institution and its sublation, in the Hegelian sense of the term. Within the context of bourgeois culture, literature has been detached from the life-praxis and relegated to an autonomous sphere of human activity. In its separateness, it produces truths and values perceived as fiction, dissociated from reality and destined to lie outside the social life. The avant-garde strives to reintegrate literature into the praxis of life inasmuch as it attempts to revolutionize the world on the basis of the literary word. To put it differently, there exists no other artistic project of the twentieth century which can equal that of the avant-garde movements in their drastic negation of the autonomy of art and in their struggle to create new modes of existence rooted in literary and artistic visions.

In the last few decades, however, within the context of late capitalism, a number of critics have undertaken the task to write an obituary of the avant-garde: including Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Leslie Fiedler in the sixties, Peter Bürger in the seventies, and, more recently, Andreas Huyssen. Essentially they claim that the new avant-garde movements represent an inauthentic gesture, an embourgeoisement of the avantgardist revolt inasmuch as their project is inevitably co-opted by the mechanisms of the culture industry. Indeed, these critics contend that the works of the new avant-gardes are produced to be instantly institutionalized. The word has relinquished its use-value and has been turned into a commodity. However, the commodification and the reification of the word—or of any artistic expres-
sion—are not always perceived as the result of an exchange-value process aimed at satisfying human needs. If, as Jean Baudrillard maintains, commodity has currently become a sign within a system of self-referential signifiers, the literary word is a simulacrum, a powerless simulation without a referent, without a reality. The difference between the real and the illusionary has been effaced. In fact, for Baudrillard the real has vanished altogether, giving rise to a “hyperreality” in which signs breed other signs that represent only themselves.5

This account of the age of simulation was clearly anticipated in the 1960s by Guy Debord, a central figure of the Situationist movement (a French group dissolved in 1968). He argued that given the present conditions of production, all aspects of life have become an “immense accumulation of spectacles” and thus the image is the final form of commodity reification. The spectacle, he writes, “is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society” (Debord, unpaged, sections 1, 6). In this perspective, the reintegration of art into life, as the fundamental project of the avant-garde, would clearly become an impossibility. The effacement of reality by postmodern thought or its rejection of legitimizing any antagonistic position does not concur with the avant-garde emancipatory and cognitive stands. (The question of the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure is undoubtedly a thorny one and obviously cannot be addressed here. It will suffice to say, however, that the guiding principle of this essay is that avant-garde language and, as we shall see, its materiality, allow for the relative autonomy of literature as a superstructure.)

The main features of the language of the avant-garde have usually been explained through spatial opposition, as for instance in the seminal work by Renato Poggioli.6 The subversive and terroristic word of the avant-garde is made possible by locating it not only outside of literary norms and conventions, but outside of hegemonic social discourses. The key question raised by these recent theoretical inquiries can be posed as follows: Can avant-garde literature stand outside of prevailing ideologies and offer a new and privileged perspective on language and on the world? Or, in more general terms; Is it possible to plan a culture of opposition within the current political economy of the sign? Obviously, if the ambitions of the avant-garde are examined from the theoretical assumptions of postmodern thought (i.e., the end of the Enlightenment project of emancipation, the end of the concept of progress, the end of a historical telos, relativity of all voices and truths), there would be no place for them in today’s literature. The end of the avant-garde
coincides with the end of modernity. It is equally obvious, however, that this is an ideological stand that may not reflect at all any current objective social condition or future possibilities open to avant-garde literature. This position can certainly be viewed as one of the prevailing voices generated by the political power and interests of the present system.

Undoubtedly, the museumification of art products puts into motion a process of mummification that neutralizes opposition inasmuch as these products are placed within the respectable walls of a social institution. It is undeniable, by the same token, that avant-garde verbal production is subject to marketability and, in time, will make its way into libraries and academic spaces, devitalized as an expression of the counter-culture. Furthermore, pivotal techniques of the avant-garde (montage, fragmentation, temporal discontinuity) have been devoured by Hollywood cinema, television, and the advertising industry—not to speak of their cannibalization within the conventional literary context.

The avant-garde movements of the sixties recognized that the market and the museum are in essence two sides of the same coin. Edoardo Sanguineti, one of the most influential theorists and writers of the Italian neo-avant-garde, maintained that the revolt of the avant-garde artist follows three structurally interconnected stages. The stage of "heroic" aspiration, of escaping the market by producing uncontaminated works, is followed by the "pathetic" stage, in which art is absorbed by the market and reduced to exchange-value. Last is the "cynical" stage, in which the innovative artist outmanoeuvres the competition by appealing to current or future markets.7 (Tragically, it may be said that avant-garde production, because of its stress on novelty, inevitably accelerates consumption. This condition, arguably, can reveal an aporia of the historical avant-garde and particularly of the new avant-garde movements: their constant search for newness coincides with capitalist modes of production, characterized by an endless race for new products and by the concomitant bourgeois desire to create new appetites for consumption). For Sanguineti, however, there exists one possible solution: the avant-garde must be ideologized by exposing the contradictions of the mercantile heteronomy and by adopting a language of disorder capable of transforming itself into a dialectical antithesis to the prevailing bourgeois ideologies.

Nonetheless, it is inevitable to ask; If transgression has been codified, how can it operate transgressively? If the techniques of shock have been absorbed and normalized, are we witnessing an exhaustion of the avant-garde? Have the artistic and literary limits reached by avant-garde works (empty canvases, dismemberment of words, silence as a form of musical experience) cre-
ated an implosion, an irreversible collapse? Clearly, if we consider the
dynamics at work within the ecosystem of literature, the end of the avant-
garde would entail the impossibility of renewal, a stagnation which can only
lead to a barren literary landscape.

Today, the ontology of the catastrophe has gained ground as it has during
every fin de siècle—even more so now at the end of a millennium. It pro-
claims the end of ideologies, the end of knowledge, the end of history, the
end of literature, the end of the subject, the end of the real, and so on. To
declare the death of the avant-garde means to accept a homologation that
renounces any form of tension and dialectic within both the literary and the
social context. Generally, these positions encompass a conservative ideolo-
gy that would lead us to believe that we live in an epoch of de-historica-
ization in which the past does not have any continuity with the present and in
which the present does not permit us to undertake any project for the future.

There is no doubt that transgression and normalization are inseparable.
Hence every avant-garde movement becomes infected by a virus of destruc-
tion that ultimately attacks its own creations. Indeed, every avant-garde is
driven either by a conscious act of suicide or by an unconscious impulse of
self-annihilation: the signs of difference are destined to become the signs of
sameness. Accordingly, any theory of the avant-garde must be grounded in
the conviction that there are no metahistorical models of literature, that there
is no transcendent literariness except in the force of imagination and antag-
onism created by language. Literature is an endless project that persistently
denies any form of crystallization.

That we have reached the end of a dialectic between transgression and
normalization is a purely ideological assumption which finds legitimation
within an economic and political system whose strategies are aimed at
blocking any form of opposition. An avant-garde movement is possible inas-
much as it is still imaginable to promote a counter-ideology, a utopian vision
drenched in language. Writing as an experience of limits, as a linguistic
“madness,” can reveal new significations charged with a force that has the
potential to break through current deadlocks and reinvent the future.

There are no pre-established procedures, but unquestionably the explo-
ration of the materiality of language represents one of the major possibili-
ties. This exploration is tied to the specificity of literary cognition and con-
stitutes an alternative to the mimetic tradition—mimesis seen as the princi-
ple that lies at the core of literary production. In the mimetic perspective, lit-
erature is essentially a vehicle of representation, a medium aimed at reach-
ing a predetermined reality and thus functioning as its mirror. It is consid-
ered an artistic attempt to capture externality or to translate, in a special and more intense language, feelings and ideas experienced before the act of writing. Whenever the traditional canon of mimesis is championed, literature unavoidably becomes a tautological form of knowledge inasmuch as it captures what is already there or knowable through another medium. (A parallel issue arises if literary cognition is compared to the discourses produced in a philosophical, political, or sociological context. To think of literature as a reproduction, albeit in a different form, of these discourses, would make it a redundant or, at best, an ancillary activity.)

It has been claimed—and rightly so—that all artistic structures should be seen as epistemological metaphors. All forms created through art are metaphoric equivalents of an "assimilated cultural persuasion," as Umberto Eco maintains in Opera aperta (151). However, the fundamental issue here can be framed as follows: Does meaning precede the creative process? Is it an a priori realization simply transferred on the page? To these questions, avant-garde practices provide a radically negative response. Literature is not viewed as a reproduction of reality or as the locus in which to reverse preconceived ideas, but as a construction of meaning, an activity capable of producing its own communication. (It should not be forgotten that the etymology of poiesis is in fact to make, to produce.) This mode of writing (explored in different ways by Mallarmé, Joyce, Artaud, the Italian and Russian Futurists, Marinetti, Chlebnikov, and Kruchonykh, in particular, Tzara and the Dadaists, Breton, Eluard and the Surrealists, the group Tel Quel, and the Novissimi) moved away from a theory of reflection and advocated a view of literature as a project centred around the materiality of language.

Deformation and displacement become the generative process of meaning. Literature—poetry in particular—is seen as a journey into the flesh of the word, into its material base with the intention of opening up new paths of signification and inspiring life to rewrite itself. Literature becomes a disruptive and deviant force that jolts the imagination and puts into motion new cognitive processes. It is the extreme attempt to think the unthought. The primacy of the signifier pushes the linguistic code to limits that perhaps no other human activity can equal. The boundaries of conventional language are viewed as a barrier to be surmounted to open a passageway to possible new worlds. In this approach, reality is not immediately accessible to consciousness. The latter is the result of the mediation performed by the signifiers. As Blanchot remarked in reference to Mallarmé's poetics, the word "is not the expression of a thing, but the absence of this thing" (69). In a si-
lar vein Valéry claimed that "thought is the labour which brings to life in us that which does not exist" (1333).

As a transgressive *energèia*, literature breaks the confines of ordinary communication and, in so doing, it broaches alternative models of knowing the world and interacting with it. It must be stressed, however, that for the avant-garde it is the self-reflexive movement of literary language which produces centrifugal effects—an expansion of imagination, cognition, and consciousness. (It is impossible to share Stanley Fish's view that there is no difference between ordinary and literary language on the grounds that formal devices are present in both. Phonic, rhythmic, syntactic elements and semantic deviations do not play the same role at all in everyday language.)

But what is the relationship between the materiality of literary language and the subject? Is signification subjectless, the result of a disseminating play engendered by the signifiers, as maintained by the deconstructionists? The claim here is that literature is not a monologic activity expressed either by a separate, autonomous subject, a pregiven entity of sensitivity and consciousness, or by an independent linguistic code. It is a dialogic process which is the result of an encounter between the desire of the subject, of a cognizing agent, and the intrinsic itineraries of meaning offered by language. The objective is not to anchor conquered states of consciousness to the written words, but to discover new forms of consciousness through the act of writing, as an alternative to that production of consciousness that we all engage into some degree or other by living our everyday lives. The signifiers are not preceded by a meaning, a presence of a signified. The avant-garde poet works in a laboratory, experimenting with linguistic chemicals in search of new compounds. Subjectivity renews itself in the act of writing; it is a dynamic process. It is the effect of a dialectic, a dialectic between a subjectivity in motion and the flux of meanings inherent to language. Literature, then, is the medium of identification of the subject, the space where new modalities of subjectivity are formed. The author is a nomad, a subject-in-process, constantly searching for new states of awareness through language.

The position of the avant-garde in regard to language cannot be aligned with that of post-structuralism. The theoretical framework of the latter is grounded in an antihumanist vision that dissolves the subject along with the intentionality of the text. For the post-structuralist, literature is the product of an uncontrollable linguistic code and intertextual memories without referents. For the avant-garde writer it is not only the locus in which the political and the ideological unconscious of linguistic constructs can be made transparent, but also the space in which new individual and social realities
can be built. One can observe the effects of depoliticization generated by the post-structuralist attempt to detach the word from reality. In contrast, avant-garde literature presents itself as a conflicting ideology and as a creation of consciousness directed at deciphering and changing the world. As Volosinov has argued in Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (a work actually attributed to Bakhtin), signs and meanings are refractions of an ideology, and consciousness is not attainable without some semiotic material. "The domain of ideology," Volosinov writes, "coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. Everything ideological possesses a semiotic value [...] consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs [...] The individual consciousness is nurtured on signs" (10, 11, 13).

This is the position of the Italian neo-avant-garde camp headed by Sanguineti. In fact, at the base of his aesthetic theories lies the postulate that the "experience of words conditions (precedes) that of things" and thus literature "is not at the service of the revolution, but is the revolution at the level of words." Accordingly, avant-garde literature re-establishes a relationship between poiesis and praxis inasmuch as it is a "critical experimentation of the hierarchies of reality as it is lived in words" ("La letteratura della crudeltà" [1967], Ideologia e linguaggio 133, 134-135). At the first meeting of the Italian neo-avant-garde, held in Palermo in 1963, Sanguineti clarified his theoretical stand:

The avant-garde expresses [...] the conscience of the relationship between the intellectual and bourgeois society and, at the same time, in its latest stage, it is intended to express in general the conscience of the relationship between ideology and language, namely the awareness of the fact that what is distinctive of literary operation is the expression of an ideology in the form of language. ("Il dibattito" 272)

Avant-garde texts challenge the reader's cultural and psychological assumptions. On the one hand, they disrupt the security and accepted normality of the reader's linguistic and ideological world and, on the other, they engender a critical process of reception and interpretation. Avant-garde texts present themselves as artificial constructs to be deciphered. Complex and radically fragmented montages, they violate the reader's interpretative practices adopted for linear and organic works and put into motion processes of intersubjectivity and critical speculation. Their absence of unity and non-organic nature (their allegorical dimension in Benjamin's sense of the term)
create a hermeneutic tension that places the reader in a hyperactive state of mind. At the same time, the non-hierarchical structure of the texts, together with the illuminations made possible by the technique of the montage, engenders an openendedness that empowers the reader to "rewrite" the text and explore his/her own subjectivity. To put it differently, the avant-garde text is not intended to be easily consumed by the reader. It activates an encounter, a dialogue between the questioning author and the inquisitive reader. As the locus of otherness and of linguistic epiphanies, avant-garde literature radicalizes the role of the reader, making him or her an integral part of the construction of the text.

The destabilization of meaning revitalizes the process of signification and favours alterity over the homogenization of subjectivity (a rather alarming phenomenon in today's mcdonaldization of culture). Opposed to standardized and reified language, avant-garde literature provides cognitive modalities that can open up new social and political spaces, new ways of being-in-the-world. The effects of derailment achieved by the signifiers produce, then, a definite and healthy separation from the habitual transparency of language. This sets in motion a process of unconscious displacement and condensation of signifiers that liberates the subject from social and ideological constructs. The seeming pathology of this language represents a revolt against practices of social interdiction of discourses. By suspending the normality of dominant models of communication, it enables the repressed and the marginalized to come to the surface. Poetry in particular, unconstrained by representational objectives, explores non-semantic properties of language and is free to follow the libidinal flow of phonic energies. Literature thus opens up a human space not colonized by the hegemony of social paradigms. The subject posits itself at an instinctual level, at a level of spontaneous and unmediated desire, that is, at a level anterior to awareness and reflexive processes. Literature allows desire to speak and to articulate new states of the self. In many ways it demonstrates Freud's maxim, "Where id was, there ego shall be" (80).

Avant-garde literature is rooted in the effort to produce subjectivity through language and thus to restore identity. Literature becomes a source of cognition and desire. But just like Plato's eros, cognition is a desire that can never achieve totality. But then, wouldn't totality transform humans into gods? Or into monsters?
NOTE

1. The reference is to the following quote: "Transform the world," Marx said; 'change life," Rimbaud said. These two watchwords are one for us" (Breton 241). All translations from texts appearing in Works Cited in the original languages are mine.

2. Applied here is Adorno's concept of negative dialectic: the role of permanent opposition of the avant-garde can be seen as a dialectics without any final synthesis, a constant dissonance within the system of literature (see in particular Negative Dialectics and Aesthetic Theory).

3. For the discussion on the relationship between avant-garde art and life-praxis see Bürger (particularly 49-51).

4. On this subject see also the positions expressed by two prominent members of the new avant-garde movements of the sixties, Guglielmi and Sollers. The former belonged to the Italian "Gruppo 63," and the latter to the French group "Tel Quel."

5. Consider the following statements by Baudrillard: "the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials": "Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible"; "the real has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible"; "postmodernity [...] is the immense process of destruction of meaning [...] We are in the era of events without consequences." (2, 19, 123, 161, 164).

6. For Poggioli, "activism," "antagonism," "agonism," and "nihilism" are essential traits of every avant-garde movement. These features place the avant-garde outside of and in opposition to social and aesthetic norms (Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia, in particular chapters 2 and 4).

7. For Sanguineti's position on avant-garde art and the process of commodification, see in particular the chapter "Sopra l'avanguardia" (1963) in Ideologia e linguaggio; for the relationship between the avant-garde and ideology, see in the same volume the chapter "Avanguardia, società, impegno" (1966). In this perspective, the issue is not the power of the word as a neutral tool of communication—indeed, as such it does not exist. There is no literary word independent of historical and ideological realities. For Sanguineti, the literary word, as we know it today, is an expression of bourgeois ideology and of the power of that social class. It is particularly for this reason that he explores possibilities of sabotaging literature as a bourgeois institution. For the relationship between language forms and ideology, Sanguineti shares the general view of Marxist criticism. An excellent overview of the Marxist positions is provided by Terry Eagleton in his Marxism and Literary Criticism. He states: "In selecting a form [...] the writer finds his choice already ideologically circumscribed. He may combine and transmute forms available to him from a literary tradition, but these forms themselves, as well as his permutation of them, are ideologically significant. The languages and devices a writer finds at hand are already saturated with certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality" (26-27). It is no surprise that for Sanguineti and other members of the Italian neo-avant-garde, the work on language and forms is considered the fundamental operation for any literary revolution.

8. The reference is made particularly to Fish's essay "How Ordinary Is Ordinary Language?" There is no dispute with Fish's claim that all aesthetics are "local and conventional rather than universal" (109). What is objectionable is his insistence that there is no difference whatsoever between ordinary language and literary language inasmuch as, in his view, deviation is not a property of the latter. The language of the avant-garde clearly shows that deviation exists not only from ordinary language but from the dominant forms of the literary institution of any given period.


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For Benjamin, an allegorical text is fragmented and thus opposed to the organic structure of the symbol. The allegorical mode finds its foremost expression in avant-garde literature in which, "the false appearance of totality is extinguished" (The Origin 176).

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