

Avant-Garde Reflexes in Yugoslav Poetry between the Two World Wars



Literature

Keywords: avant-garde codes, epic modelling system, anti-traditionalism, depersonalisation of the lyrical subject, resemantisation, desemantisation, oneirism, expressionism, surrealism.

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Abstract

This paper provides an interpretation of the poetic flows in the territory of the South Slavs in the period between the two World Wars, with special emphasis on the penetration of avant-garde codes into the Montenegrin poetry of that time. With regard to the development and persistence of epic modelling systems in the creation of poetry, it was necessary to present the essence of avant-garde coordinates, in the framework of which the potential for a different type of poetic expression was recognised in a society where tradition was highly respected. Cultivation of epic poetry as a literary genre representing the Montenegrin model of thinking and living, and then a romantic experience of the world, in addition to propositions imposed by the romantic method of creation, were not the ideal conditions for the penetration of innovative models into the realisation of poetic material. On the contrary, under such circumstances it was difficult to create an anti-traditional concept. A depersonalisation of the lyrical subject, an aesthetic revaluation of literature in which there is no tendency to like, resemantisation and desemantisation as methods of breaking the traditional canon, and finally a tendency towards oneirism, are all features of avant-garde isms that were known for not being fruitful in the Montenegrin interwar period, but anti-traditionalism still found its place through the actions of particular artists. Different verse organisation, the creation of stanzas, exclamative phrases, the introduction of rhyme into the minus process and an abandoning of punctuation marks are all expressionistic reflexes recorded in our country as well, and certain surrealist codes present, particularly in the work of Risto Ratkovic, provide evidence for the existence of certain avant-garde codes in Montenegrin poetry in the period between the two World Wars.

1. Introduction

In the opinion of Alexander Flaker¹ the date of the formation of the avant-garde is associated with the year 1909, because right at that time certain branches of programme innovations were made, and Marinetti's Manifesto of Futurism, the founding document of the avant-garde movement, was also published. As a conclusion to this formation, Flaker takes the year 1930, arguing that social realism, as a poetics that grows on realist principles and opposes the avant-garde, was gaining momentum and, anyway, literature was at that time entering a new era. Numerous² literary scholars believe that the avant-garde was situated between the two World Wars, however, that opinion is taken as insufficiently accurate, since it is known that avant-garde literary events began in the first decade of the twentieth century, that is, after the modernist currents that were relatively productive in Yugoslav literature as well. Also, the opinion that the avant-garde ended in 1941, that is, before World War II began from the standpoint of Yugoslavia, cannot be considered relevant, as it has already been stated that neo-realist poetics was promoting its views as much as a decade before the war.

2. Avant-Garde Codes in Yugoslav Poetry Between the Two World Wars

The literary trends that occur in the period between 1910 and 1930 in Serbian, Croatian and somewhat in Slovenian, Macedonian and Montenegrin literature are: Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Zenitism, Sumatraism, Cubism, Constructivism, Hipnism, Cosmism, Surrealism, etc. The critic Aleksandar Jovanovic in his manuscript entitled *Osnove srpskog modernizma* (The Bases of Serbian Modernism) concluded that some routes may be referred to as complete, while some are just the signs of individual, particular currents.³

¹ Aleksandar Flaker, *Poetika osporavanja*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1982.

² See: Tanja Popović, *Rječnik književnih termina*, Logos Art, Beograd, 2007.

³ See: Aleksandar Jovanović, *Osnove srpskog modernizma*, *Savremenik*, No. 4-5, April-May 1987.

Although among the above-mentioned branches there are certain differences, the thing that unites them is a relationship of negating the legacy of the past, particularly schematised writing procedures, including perception, and then the destruction of the existing reality and the formation of surreal projections and the deautomatisation of the creative literary procedure which resulted in saturation with prior linguistic expression, and, at the same time, a verbal shaping of the world.

Implementing the process of desemantisation, the avant-garde disintegrates all known literary canons in the design and interpretation of a literary work; in addition, everything has a rational origin, namely, a form of material existence in reality, finding its place in literature, exposing it to the unscrupulous criticism of the avant-garde which ignores reality and its reflection in the work, conceiving a new and sometimes difficult to understand anti-aesthetic.

The disruption of the hierarchy of culture, art and the world in general, that the avant-garde ruthlessly carries out, results in an abnormal order of things, so it is quite understandable that the grotesque is one of the primary means of avant-garde expression. (Bečanović 2009: 36). The grotesque achieves predominance in the duration of surrealism but also, however, finds its place in other branches, proving to be an instrument suitable for displaying an ironic attitude towards the achievements of culture, and therefore, the unmasking of the past and present which is the primary goal of the grotesque as an avant-garde form of expression.

It follows that the grotesque is useful in the aforementioned process of desemantisation which is based on the denial of a direction close to the direction or formation that becomes the subject of the denial. Very similar to this process is the process of resemantisation⁴, but with the difference that the direction which has been criticised is quite far away from the direction that establishes the attitude of negation towards the subject of the criticism.

In this regard, the avant-garde is interpreted as a formation which not only desemantises the achievements of literature, but it certainly resemantises all products created in directions that are proclaimed as normativism in literature.

By means of reviewing all previously established functions of literature, the avant-garde touches on the social and ethical goals that were formed in literature before it appeared, during the domination of the epoch of realism. While realism was closely related to everyday life, shaping literature, which, according to requirements is a prototype model of reality, the avant-garde was in principle against utilitarianism, and artism and *l'art pour l'art*-ism.

With quite the same intensity that challenges the realist typisation of social relations and phenomena, the avant-garde challenged the high artistic demands and slavery to form for the sake of imposed standards of beauty. The principles of harmony and beauty as well as principles of versification, by which it achieves the required harmony, are the main elements of its poetic language, which in the era of the poetics of challenging are ruthlessly eliminated, because the avant-garde poet believes that the text does not have to be subject to any standards of creation.

By bringing in the creative act of a new linguistic process and by composing a peculiar metre free from all rules, using a vocabulary which is often unrecognisable and incomprehensible to the recipient, the avant-garde poet, in fact, vigorously breaks with traditional constraints and propagates a new sound and sign in poetry.

⁴ Aleksandar Flaker, *Poetika osporavanja*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1982.

The high degree of resistance to the inherited values, as well as the categorisation of the poetic act as individual and free from all scruples are the coordinates which make the avant-garde liberal when it comes to poetic form. These are also the reasons why this was the formation under whose auspices the largest number of directions, in which poets freely expressed themselves, were formed. The lack of pretension about creating lasting change and a constant and unchangeable artwork is another qualifier that defines the avant-garde as the epoch of the great verbal experiment.

When explaining the nature of the new poetic flow, Milos Crnjanski notes: *Without the banal squares and the town-crier music of previous metrics, the work is a pure form of ecstasy. (...) We separate the rhythm of sunny days from the rhythms of the night. No, we do not lay it all into already prepared moulds.* (Crnjanski 1987: 267). The author suggests that the newly-formed ecstatic cannot express the norms of traditional metrics.

A new term that shifts the expectations of readers requires new aspects of literary design, namely, innovation in technical terms which, inevitably, resulted in a new layout of verses, stanzas, a different rhythm and the omission of rhyme. From a diachronic perspective, the avant-garde is the formation with the highest capacity of resistance against the traditional mores of creation, and its confrontation is directed particularly towards already existing branches of art, which is almost equal to the animosity that the Renaissance showed towards mediaeval dogmatism. Coping with realist texts and also with Romantic lyricism in which, the authorial and creative *me* are typically intertwined, also means being in active dialogue with the criticised movements, which essentially must constitute a basic process of desemantisation.

The fact that we noted the avant-garde pretence of polemical quotations⁵, results in a conclusion about the destructive dialogue of the avant-garde with the superseded texts, as well as about the enviable level of developed dialogues which the avant-garde makes, and on the basis of which becomes non-normative and extremely critical. This type of citation, in the opinion of Dubravka Oraić-Tolić, is an illuminating medium which established a new canon of the interpretation of everything traditional.

If we have defined the avant-garde as an antiformative formation or an aesthetic process dominated by revaluation, then we have already pointed out in this definition its metatextuality: so in order to revalue something, there has to already exist value. (Flaker 1982: 42) Thus, Crnjanski's ironic relationship towards the "town-crier music of the previous metrics" is a necessary result of the inclination of the avant-garde poet towards stereotyped rules of writing in which he could not locate the expression of a rebellious generation of poets. A decanonisation of the aesthetic normativism, destruction of the past, provocation of the present and a revulsion towards phenomena in society, in particular towards bourgeois conformism, as well walking in the irrational conditions that had become a fundamental alternative to living, are elements of the inspiration of avant-garde poets, from which all the features of avant-garde literary creation come.

Depersonalisation of the poetic subject is certainly the primary process in avant-garde poetry; the avant-garde, as a completely non-normative formation was completely against all forms of materialisation, and as supernatural and hallucinatory states were the intimate residence of the avant-garde poet, it is understandable that in such a space it is hard to recognise the lyrical subject.

On the contrary, subjectivity was introduced into the *minus method*, which means that the decomposition of something that had previously been realised as a structural element of poetry, led to a complete depersonalisation of the subject, contributing to the creation of another disruptive factor in the understanding and experiencing of this poetry.

⁵ Dubravka Oraić-Tolić, *Teorija citatnosti*, Grafički zavod Hrvatske, Zagreb, 1990.

Of course, the process of impersonalisation of the lyrical subject has its changes depending on the particular branch, but also depending on the poet himself, so that the definition of depersonalisation of the lyrical subject is not always subject to a general rule.

Aleksandar Flaker said that we cannot read the testimony of avant-garde artists, including those in the manifestos, *on the referential level, nor can it be used as reliable witnesses, but rather they always need to be analysed on the basis of the entire text of a special purpose and function.* (Flaker 1982: 21) The author notes that the manifestos and programmes of the avant-garde are mainly unreliable publications for substantive understanding of the avant-garde, as the explicit and implicit poetics of avant-garde artists did not always coincide; on the contrary, the avant-garde poet considered the poem a verbal structure exempt from the imposition of any rules.

In this way, the poem has become aesthetically provocative and often shocking, because the aim of the avant-garde is to amaze and surprise. The previously given review of the concept of the avant-garde lyrical subject also has its usefulness in the function of defamiliarisation of the poetic process, or rather, for the purpose of disrupting the expectations of the recipient. So the recognisable lyrical *me* in a poem, as part of the avant-garde is most often attacked and severely withdrawn from use, and at times, however, the subject's experiential *me* is still palpable, but is not fully realised because of the very lack of an object to which a particular confession of the poet could be targeted. The subject is, therefore, depersonalised and its presence is either completely cancelled out or minimised, because the avant-garde, as an anti-mimetic formation, marginalises expression that could exist and interact in a *me-you* relationship⁶. According to Hugo Friedrich, the process of depersonalisation of a lyrical subject corresponds to the avant-garde decomposition of the world of real existence, and certainly to the appearance of dehumanisation in such a world, and it is quite understandable that the result of such relations is the emergence of a kind of aesthetic ugliness in which grotesque abnormalities, lack of logic, discontinuity of space and the elimination of temporal causal connection dominate.

One of the directions that acts under the avant-garde formations by means of verbal resistance to forms of class exploitation and regime dictatorship, is Dadaism. It is not a social or literary movement and it does not have the identity of a movement of the proletariat, because it appears before the October Revolution, but it resists the stratification of society in its embryonic form. It indicates a new, open-minded thought. Certainly, one cannot talk about Dadaism or any other avant-garde direction being identified as an ideological movement, but it is clear that this literature could not be minimised to a utilitarian character.

But the avant-garde connects its origin with the era of Communism and the October Revolution of 1917, so it is quite understandable that Communist ideology could not be ignored; also, everything that might have put down roots, and that concerned the Yugoslav avant-garde, in the transmission of poetic thoughts, acclimatised and adopted new rules and new knowledge.

When it comes to the first period after the October Revolution, which is tentatively called the twenties, we are talking about a revolutionary (in terms of class) segment of European literature, characterised primarily as an autonomous constitution of leftist movements within a general process, which we have already called the avant-garde (Flaker 1982: 180)

Thus, the social misery and constitution of the revolutionary models, when it comes to poetic expression, is the pivot which helped Dadaism approach the left. However, this movement could never become proletarian because of the existing, i.e. anti-mimetic, profile.

⁶ See: Aleksandar Flaker, *Poetika osporavanja*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1982.

It appeared in 1916 in Zurich and in New York at the same time and it was considered as a compatible series of futuristic and expressionist aspirations, since its primary goal was to animate the audience.

In fact, Dadaists represent an intellectual and contemplative circle whose thoughtful route consists in the transformation of the current world which is, from their perspective, distorted, changed beyond recognition, and finally, brought to non-existence, until the final and desired nothingness.

They stand for a society in which there will be no anarchists, revolutionaries, proletarians, bourgeois, or even religion, considering all of the above unnecessary because they limit mankind's spirituality. *The revolutionary version of Dadaism, in social terms, was given by the German avant-gardists gathered around Baargeld, one of the founders of the Communist Party and of Der Ventilator.* (Živković, 2001: 120)

Opposition to the existing material resulted in construction of special surreal worlds that have become a chronotope of the reality of avant-garde. Under the auspices of Zenitism that appeared in Zagreb in 1920, numerous expressionist agents were created, which meant that poetic expression had become a new kind of absolute intransigence with the system.

In the opening address of the show called Zenit, editor Ljubomir Micic announced: Our suffering generation is dying. It has been overrun and destroyed. The spectre of the red fury of war, has uncovered with its criminal claws a cemetery for all of us and for millions of people.⁷ Zenitism is an aesthetically provocative movement that was, according to Flaker, limited to a Belgrade group of writers called *Alpha*, and later became attractive to many Croatian writers, among which we would like to emphasise Antun Branko Simic. *Essentially eclectic, it seems that the programme of Zenitism gathered opposites that characterised the avant-garde in general:*

(...) to adjust futuristic civilisation complexes and a constructive focus on the post-revolutionary days with primitivism and the extreme iconoclastics of Dadaism as well as to reconcile anarcho-individualism with the propaganda of Soviet revolutionary collectivism (...) (Flaker 1982: 93).

It is already well known that the basis of the emergence of the avant-garde is a socio-historical phenomenon whose cultural heritage this formation confronts in such a way that avant-garde poetics modifies and adapts the existing positions in art to new trends or shifts them entirely, considering them canonical. A movement which seeks a radical shift from tradition is expressionism, and it was precisely its rebellious attitude towards reality that was taken up by Zenitism. The radical branch of the avant-garde includes futurism as an anti-traditional movement that favours extroversion in appearance, as well as orientation towards the future. It was mainly established in Italy and Russia, where Italian Futurism proved to be an extremely destructive movement with Nazi tendencies, while Russia remained consistent to revolution and its position on the democratisation of art. Surrealism, as a movement which also incorporates the requirements of the avant-garde and radically transforms literariness, which is diametrically opposed to the traditional linguistic-stylistic procedure, especially when it comes to the specifics of poetic style, appeared at the end of the avant-garde.

The almanacs that were initiated by Risto Ratkovic (*White Show, The Reflex of Youth, Art, A Glass of Water and Eternity*) in Belgrade, and which became a documented expression of a new aestheticism, because they sublimate all the features the literary avant-garde, showed what was innovative in the surrealist movement and as well as in the lyrical *me*. Surrealist poetry was often referred to as visual poetry because pictorial

⁷ Taken from Dragiša Živković, Romanov, Banja Luka, 2001, p.940.

elements penetrated into literature, so the word-images had their own intense colour and photographic impressiveness.

By eliminating punctuation, poets released verbal material, which highlighted the rebellion against all poetic limits, and opened a wide field of view to the poetry of the image which became a new genre in the expansion of the avant-garde fusion of genres. The language of poetry became different because of the photo-centric feature which enabled language to return to its basic, concrete meaning. It is therefore not surprising that the in the surrealist movement syntax looked like the beginnings of a child's mastery of language skills, since it was deformed and frequently incomprehensible.

The infantile point of view, close to the Surrealists, caused an escape into unreal worlds in which communication had to be an unrecognisable and incomprehensible system of ordinary conversation. Metaphysical communication, unusual vocabulary, obscene space and illogical syntactic relationships led to the incompleteness of surrealist language through which the poet broadcast his dissatisfaction with reality.

In the process of active decanonisation and intense resistance to all the rules of creation, there is a merging of two or more of the arts (literature and art), as well as numerous experimental branches as the products of the merging of literature and journalism, so the mosaic assembly of poetic texts and stories is not uncommon in the eclectic variety of genres.

It is clear that poetry which deconstructs all the norms of writing and even discredits their former literature, especially the tendency of Bogdan Popovic that a poem must be a harmony of sound and meaning, cannot be subjected to the usual standards of analysis, and looking at its emotional point and compositional unity is also impossible, because poetry of a described, and therefore iconic character, slips out of the control of theorisation. By studying the structure of modern lyrics, Hugo Friedrich called the language in his poems from the beginning of the 20th century the *incongruent style*.

The difference compared to earlier lyric poetry, is therefore in the disturbed balance between the content of the testimony and the method of testimony and due to the preponderance of the latter. This abnormal style attracts attention by its restlessness, upheavals and oddities. (...) Disagreement between the sign and the signified is a law of modern poetry and modern art. (Friedrich 2003: 161)

Thus, the poetry of the avant-garde trends includes and promotes anti-traditional tendencies and new language, becoming incongruent since it avoids ordinary sentence congruence and excludes a logical connection between syntactic parts. Thus conceived, the new style is poetic material which undermines the principles of analytical and synthetic aspects presented in Kaiser's *The Language of a Piece of Art*.

Displacing the traditional mechanism of functioning of poetic language, the new style also terminates the metalinguistic function, because the sender and recipient do not use the same code of communication, thereby the Fatick function of language disappears. What the avant-garde text can offer the recipient is provocation and a state of shock.

Umberto Eco's understanding that what the avant-garde offers in its ontological and anti-traditional world, in fact, is the beauty of provocation, because *it wants to teach a different interpretation of the world views, enjoying the return to the archaic and exotic models (Eco 2004: 414)* is therefore understandable.

The technical side of avant-garde, primarily surrealist, text prevents the identification of causality between images that constantly rotate, while logic, as a way of understanding and meaning, represents the default setting in the social realist poetic discourse. In this regard, the poetry of social realism stands out as extremely mimetic, while time and space are connected with the present, i.e. with current events in the real world, and the lyrical subject is clearly detached, recognisable, because it is the bearer of a message to the broad popular masses. The horizon of expectations of the recipient cannot be compromised because the order of syntax and logic is not broken; on the contrary, everything has a utilitarian tendency, and therefore it is understandable to the recipient. The engaged poetry in which the ideas of Proletkult are manifested, where reality is mapped and the oneiric experiences of avant-garde poets indoctrinate, is given a very important place in Montenegrin literature. The clarity of the message, high-referentiality, the concretisation of time and space and logical connection in all the aforementioned, are the characteristics of the neo-realist procedure that particularly came to life in Montenegrin literature, but the predominance of socialist realism, however, does not mean that avant-garde reflexes did not find their place at all in Montenegrin poetry.

3. Conclusion

The avant-garde, although challenged and minimised in Montenegro, however did have its place, even in those poets who did not recognise it and who even declared it undesirable, and proclaimed its assets and areas of interest disgusting. There are numerous examples of contradictory poets in the science of literature in general, so it is not surprising that the situation also occurs in the Montenegrin semiotic space between the two World Wars. From all that has been mentioned, it can be concluded that all the poets of this period, whether they recognise it or not, strove to build a personal style of writing that would somewhat fit the requirements of modern expression. *One can be modern poet in many different ways and by different routes. All one has to do is to find one's own path.*⁸

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⁸ Taken from Radomir Ivanović book of examples *Ogledi iz makedonske književnosti*, Obod Cetinje, 1980, p.15.