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## From modernism to the avant-garde : Russian-Czech parallels

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## FROM MODERNISM TO THE AVANT-GARDE

### Russian-Czech Parallels

From the historical point of view modernism and the avant-garde are part of the period from the 1870s to the 1940s. But even later their development was not finished. Their genealogy is characterized by permanent transformations, during which separate signs continue to mix and are enriched with new dimensions. The first chapter *The aesthetics of modernism and the avant-garde* describes the transformations of aesthetic perception in literature and fine arts in the process of development from impressionism and art nouveau through decadence and symbolism to acmeism. The last one, thanks to its neoclassicist simplicity, makes a bridge between both of these phenomena, leading to other phases of the Russian avant-garde, from futurism and cubistic futurism to constructivism.

The object of the present book – to map out the process leading from modernism to the avant-garde – also required investigation into periods that preceded these style-forming movements. To handle this issue more easily, the geological principle was chosen, as it allows changes within each of the genres to be followed, though this criterion has sometimes had to be disregarded due to the comparative aspect (as, for example, in the comparison of a novel's and drama's treatment of the same or similar theme). In regard to the effort to characterise both modernism and the avant-garde in their development and morphological changes, the aspect of chronological sequence is applied, while the comparative method has necessitated the use of materials from the period preceding modernism. Turgenyev's and Dostoevsky's novels, analysed in their relation to future modernism, are studied both from the morphological standpoint (*The Smoke*) and the anthropological standpoint (*The Newly Cleared Land*, *Brothers Karamazov*, compared with Artsybashev's *Sanin* or Bely's *Silver Dove*). Whereas immediate continuation has been found in this case, even if differentiated by the change of the philosophy of life (*Sanin*) and by growing conflicts in the social situation, ethics and style (*The Silver Dove*), the following comparative probe into novellas from L. N. Tolstoy and A. P. Chekhov to M. P. Artsybashev and Ladislav Klíma shows that the angle of vision is refracted. Although the extreme boundary of death is always considered from the point of view of what the protagonists have experienced up to the moment of death, there is a fundamental difference between modernism, reaching back to L. N. Tolstoy, and the avant-garde (L. Klíma): the difference can be seen on the level of religion and philosophy (the faith in incarnation) and poetics.

The popularity of historical themes, typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, does not recede into the background either in modernism or in the avant-garde, but their material assumes a new appearance. Merezhkovsky's subject of the Italian Renaissance corroborates the important role played in modernism by the aesthetics of fine arts, influencing the morphology of prose. The choice of a different genre in dealing with the same subject matter necessarily leads to morphological changes. This is the case in the transformation of D. S. Merezhkovsky's comprehensive novel *Peter and Alexis* into the drama *Tsarévitch Alexis*. Similar results can be seen in comparing V. Bryusov's catastrophic and political anti-utopias with those by E. Zamyatin and G. Orwell. Changes in the poetics of modernistic and avant-garde prose were discovered in works by Alexei Remizov (the problem of symbol and myth), Josef Hašek, Karel Čapek and Bohumil Hrabal (the poetics of humour), Daniil Kharms, Karel Čapek, Viktor Pelevin and Jiří Kratochvíl (the philosophy of pragmatism – a way to postmodernism).

Due to the interdisciplinary character of the present monograph, the prevailing literary aspect is enriched by the attention to the problems of the fine arts. A complete collection of pictures is considered, namely the collection of impressionist and art-nouveau paintings brought to Czechoslovakia by Antonín Hrabě – the owner of a prestigious Moscow frame-making firm in the early 1920s; his son Sergei Hrabě, who owned most of the pictures, donated, with his sister Ludmila, the entire collection to the National Gallery in Prague. This interesting collection, analysed in the present monograph (V. Polenov, E. Polenova, M. Nesterov, I. Levitan, V. Baksheev, S. Zhukovsky, P.

Kelin, L. Turzhansky, N. Dubovskoy, D. Marten etc.), has its analogy in Russian impressionist and urbanistic poetry (K. D. Balmont, V. Bryusov), some of which is published here in the original and in the Czech translation. Similar specimens of ekphrasis can be found in the monographic chapter on one of the representatives of the inter-war avant-garde, Grigory Musatov, who lived in Prague as a Russian émigré from the early 1920s. His early works, inspired by memories of his youth in the country near the river Volga, resemble Blok's symbolist poetry. The monumental figurative stylisation of *Stenka Razin*, painted in the spirit of the folk art called *lubok*, evokes V. Khlebnikov's poem (verse epic) of the same name.

The fine arts are also represented in two other extensive sections of the present book. In the field of theatre, there is a treatment of I. Ya. Bilibin's costume and stage designs for N. Rimsky-Korsakov's *Tsar Saltan*, the libretto of which is often compared with the well-known fairy tale by A. S. Pushkin. Another chapter is dedicated to V. E. Meyerhold's famous staging of M. Yu. Lermontov's *Masquerade* with A. Golovin's stage and costume designs. This extraordinary presentation from 1917 is compared with the no less interesting Brno performance directed by Karel Jernek and designed by Zdeněk Rossmann in 1941. The poetry section contains a chapter on Andrei Bely's relation to painting, including several reproductions of his caricatures, as well as a comparative probe into the Russian and French versions of M. Tsvetaeva's folklore-style narrative poem *The Swain (Molodets)* with illustrations by her friend Natálie Goncharova. The visual art component of the book also depicts the development from art nouveau to art deco in the works of the Ukrainian painter Heorhiy Narbut, whose first paintings were influenced by I. Ya. Bilibin and whose last were the first art deco works in the Ukraine, closely related to the works of the Lvov painters, who had a similar orientation.

The drama section presents papers on aesthetics (A. Veselovsky, Jos. Durdík, O. Hostinský, O. Zich, S. Skwarczyńska), adumbrating and accompanying attempts at innovation in drama and the theatre in modernism and the avant-garde. Much attention is paid to A. P. Chekhov and his relation to the work of both H. Ibsen and M. Maeterlinck. Russian, and partly also Czech, symbolist dramas are analysed in the chapter *The myth and philosophy of life in the poetics of drama*. A. Blok's *The Fair Show Booth (Balagančik)*, a breakthrough in this field, suggests a comparison with V. Mayakovsky's early drama *Vladimir Mayakovskiy* and his narrative poem *Man*. The two above-mentioned interdisciplinary chapters, analysing the modernistic and avant-garde treatments of romantic subjects (*The Masquerade*, *Tsar Saltan*), are followed by an analysis of M. Tsvetaeva's dramas. Their romantic model is modified by a change of imagery in which one can see her knowledge of the symbolist drama with its interest in antique mythology. Even more expressive changes can be seen in two forms of the avant-garde grotesque, represented either by V. Khlebnikov's poem *Zangezi*, compared with F. Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and V. Solovyov's comedies, or the drama by D. Kharms *Elizaveta Bam*, which follows A. V. Sukhovo-Kobylin's absurd trilogy and A. Jarry's *King Ubu*.

The poetry section opens with a study devoted to modern manifestations of prosimeter, i. e. the insertion of verse passages into prose or drama with an important ethical and morphological message. The origins of Russian modernistic poetry are presented with an analysis of F. I. Tyutchev's work. The development of symbolism itself is exemplified by Vladimir Solovyov's poetry. In a specific way it completes the profile of this original thinker, who had a considerable impact on the philosophical orientation of generations of emerging poets. The aesthetic origins of Russian modernism are examined in the chapters *The magic power of poetry* and *The principle of music in Russian modernism*. They are based on a comparison of essays and poetry by Konstantin Balmont, Andrei Bely and Alexandr Blok. Special attention is paid to the development in Andrei Bely's lyric cycles: he was one of the authors who continually rewrote their poems. As a young poet he was closely connected with the group *The World of Art*, oriented towards symbolism and art nouveau, and he followed the social line of Nekrasov's poetry. However, in the 1920s he became an author of daring experiments with a hidden political message. Roman Jakobson initiated a study on the myth of demonic statue in symbolism (A. Blok) and futurism (V. Khlebnikov). The genre of *poema*, represented, for example, by Khlebnikov's *The Monument* in this chapter, is further discussed in the analysis of the poetics of Marina Tsvetaeva's narrative poems. It ranges from folklore myth to the old archetypes in disguise, topical in biblical times (the mountain and its connotations, like the motifs of rise and fall, resurrection and damnation, the closed space of a house, the disintegration of which threatens the last protective sacral refuge, etc.). The shift in time and space, shown in the comparison of the Russian and French versions of the narrative poem *The Swain (Molodets, subtitle A Fairy tale)*, supplements the genealogy of Tsvetaeva's work from a perspective hitherto unknown.

The last literary-critical chapter, monitoring peripeteias in the development of Russian and Czech poetry from symbolism to the avant-garde with regard to mutual knowledge, including personal contacts, follows a historical approach to literature and poetics and therefore partly continues the introductory study *The aesthetics of modernism and the avant-garde*, which also touches upon Russian–Czech parallels. The strict formulations of the modernists' and especially the avant-garde's manifestos proved to be realised in a rather different way in poetry. The spiteful rejection of predecessors was replaced by configured stylisation and the return to old influences, which led to new discoveries. Pre-death existential feelings were in astonishing accordance between poets and the heroes of prose works (the chapter *The sign as the mirror of the soul*, Wolker – Jesenin). The word was the poet's best friend. This is another point on which modernism and the avant-garde are in agreement; they only use it in different ways. While the symbolist, impressionist and acmeist takes a flute into his hands, the futurist prefers a scalpel (though the principle of cutting – splitting words between lines – can be found in the symbolist A. Bely's poetry as early as in the 1910s). The 1920s bring a new phenomenon: letters and words begin to appear on canvas of pictures, and poems change into visual signs, much as they did in the baroque period.

The fine arts are reflected not only in avant-garde prose, but also in modernistic literature. Merezhkovsky's novels apply Renaissance circle composition. The young Andrei Bely is inspired by art nouveau stylisation in painting, the mature Bely uses the technique of collage. Visual arts cannot be neglected in any theatre performance; theatre attracts leading modernist and avant-garde artists. All the studied genres show an interest in the category of time which often becomes the theme. Historical genres, similarly to others, change and are enriched by new philosophical dimensions. F. Schlegel's saying that a historian is a prophet turned back becomes a new form in Dmitry Merezhkovsky's searching after the sense of history. In Valery Bryusov's works a historian is connected with his futurist counterpart. He is the author of anti-utopias, which correspond to the futurist utopias and the work of next generations influenced by the philosophy of pragmatism.

The typological comparison of Russian and Czech literature yields some fundamental information, to a high degree connected with the different geopolitical characters of these literatures. Each of them has their own high and low points, but they reach them at different times. This all plays a part in forming the so-called national character. Whatever our perception of this phenomenon, it cannot be ignored (the irony and self-irony in Czech humour and absurd farce – and the Russian petrification of myth in modernism and the avant-garde, accompanied by the effort to realise political myth). The difference in the development of the two traditions can also be seen in the field of poetics (the influence of Roman satire on forming the character of Russian satire and black humour, as in Kharm's work, and differences in the historical development of prosody, leading to dissimilar formations of experiment in poetry: Russian verse works predominantly with language, Czech verse with metre, etc.). Nevertheless, there also exist remarkable correspondences, arising from the common European cultural and philosophical context, as well as from mutual contacts and knowledge. This concerns not only analogies in international movements (decadence, symbolism, art nouveau, cubism and constructivism), but also national innovations of wider concepts such as acmeism, for example, which is the Russian variety of neoclassicism, or imagism, related to Czech poetism because of its emphasis on the poetic image. The effort to change the poetic word brought Russian futurism close to the Russian formalism, which was one of the sources of Czech structuralism. Changes in literature and the arts did not take place in a vacuum. The left orientation of the Czech avant-garde in the 1920s resulted in their interest in Soviet writers and other artists, while the émigré poets, including Tsvetaeva, were totally ignored. The Soviet Union liquidated avant-garde works and even their authors. The attitude towards foreign writers changed as well: the Czech poet V. Nezval spoke as a witness to the adverse approach of the official Soviet delegation towards French and Czech surrealism at the International Congress of Contemporary Culture held in Paris in 1935.

The transition from modernism to the avant-garde occurred for two different reasons. The most obvious was the demonstrative rejection of the artists and their work, often accompanied by declarative presentations of the experiment in narrower or wider meetings. The belief in the magic or power of art, characteristic of modernism, was replaced by the conviction that creation is very similar to play, which is one of the inborn abilities of human beings. But the creative process was much more complicated. Much of what was refused in declarations was only transformed into new forms. As the result of this process there proved to exist a wide range of movements, trends and positions – from the most sharply defined to various intermediate stages – in which some distinctive

procedures were dimmed, only coming to the fore in the national or international context with the benefit of hindsight (V. Khlebnikov, M. Tsvetaeva, D. Kharms). A number of avant-garde innovations have their foundations in previous developments, as was the case when modernism came into existence (I. S. Turgenev, F. M. Dostoevsky, A. Bely). When research is carried out years later, it can therefore find inner connections between modernism and the avant-garde. These movements were traditionally examined as historical categories in their given contexts, but their further development suggests that they also have their timeless dimensions. The fact is that in this wider sense they can never end since they denote searches for new ways and approaches, which are indispensable for the development of art. If we accept this conception, we shall see the main difference between the concepts of modern (i. e. new) and avant-garde (i. e. unexpected) in the emphasis on shocking experiment as a typical feature of the avant-garde. A similar endless process can be found in the oscillation between myth and symbol. The analysis of 19th and 20th century authors shows that not only the symbol, but also the myth is still alive, though its manifestation is often very abstract, corresponding to the contemporary system of thought.

The most conclusive connection between modernism and the avant-garde is the interest in the material by which literature, arts and music are made. That is the reason of the interest in the work with language, line, colour or tone. The provocative form of the art programme, manifested by modernism and especially the avant-garde and their inner union is one of the fundamental laws of evolution in the same way as the semantic and structural connections between literature, arts, music and other forms of culture. The inner connection of modernism and the avant-garde, reflected in postmodernism, which develops the opinions of both the phenomena, modifies it into a new formation.