Stanisław Jaworski

The Cracow Avant-garde

Articles

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The term "avant-garde" had been used in the Polish criticism as a password, call or postulate; only later on it became a histoliterary name. In the Polish science of literature the name meant primarily the Cracow group, and more rarely: all the literary currents bearing features of novelty. [1] Presently the scope of it is ever expanding: not only the Warsaw avant-garde is mentioned (the *Almanach Nowej Sztuki*, 1924–1925, mainly K. Gacki, A. Stern, S. Brucz) but also expressionism and futurism are included; texts are produced about the avant-garde in the theatre (the works of S. I. Witkiewicz) or in prose (B. Schulz, W. Gombrowicz). The term is applied not only to trends and phenomena of the constructivist nature but also to opposite tendencies aiming at bringing out the subconscious.

What is defined as avant-gardism includes various components entering diverse relationships with clear-cut displacements of proportions and accents. From a certain point of view it would be possible to fit them into a scale where one extreme would be the pole of autotelism, or orientation on inner problems of art, the

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[1] G. Gazda writes about it extensively in *Awangarda – nowoczesność i tradycja* (*Avant-garde: Modern Approaches and Tradition*), Łódź 1987. The name "Cracow avant-garde" included a group of writers attracted to the artistic programme of Tadeusz Peiper, to a paper called *Zwrotnica* published by him. When *Zwrotnica* was closed they took up other forms of group activities (joint statements, the paper *Linia*). The group was formed, next to Peiper, by Julian Przyboś, Jan Brzękowski, Jalu Kurek. The writers were characterized by a strong sense group community that had a situational-programmatic character and high theoretical--programmatic awareness. They adopted the name "avant-garde" to mark their activities.

other pole extreme – socialization, or orientation on its social functions.

The avant-garde art faced the following tasks: 1) an attempt to create a new image of the world integrated with new scientific discoveries; a new "vision of everyday life;"[2] 2) an attempt to create a new vision of social life retaining also the attitude to the development of technology and urban-industrial civilization plus the concept of man and history; 3) the necessity of defining the place of art in social life and the character of relations between the artistic and the social phenomena, primarily the social revolution and regaining of sovereignty; 4) the necessity to define a model of art capable of implementing these tasks, i.e. necessity of formulating a series of statements concerning the character and direction of artistic transformations.

The avant-garde thought inherited from the 19th century faith in science – and in this it is close to the 20th century understanding of these issues. We can even speak of the myth of science, with all its consequences. But the science of the early 20th century was building a new image of the world which transgressed the limits of the so-called common sense (e.g. in the theory of relativity). Hence, a quite new understanding of time and space, discontinuity of the world, questioning strict causality emerged.

Suggestion from science led to rejection of the principle of mimetism. Cubism in painting and literary avant-garde proposed montage, i. e. breaking up the structure of reality by the structure of imagination, that is, a structure freed from cognitive illusions.[3] Adam Ważyk reminisced that the strongest experience of his youth was the coming to know of new scientific theories, the theory of relativity by Einstein in particular. He was aware then that he had some contact with a "great break-through not only in science but also in the entire modern mentality," "man resorted to imagination and it confirmed the latter's value while at the same time the new theories demanded breaking with the habits of imagination."[4]

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[2] A formulation from A. Ważyk's book *Dziwna historia awangardy* (*A Strange History of the Avant-garde*), Warszawa 1977, p. 77.

[3] Cf. P. Hadermann, "Le Cubisme a-t-il influencé la littérature," *Annales d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archeologie*, 1979, I.

[4] A. Ważyk, *Kwestia gustu* (*Matter of Taste*), Warszawa 1966, p. 46.

From the reading on Poincaré and from talks about Einstein it followed that the way to come to know the world leads through freeing oneself in contact with reality from all earlier beliefs. The main theme of Ważyk's early works was a contact of human mind with the world, the contact conceived as an experience, a cognitive adventure (possibly, an adventure in cognition). The point was to arrive at a picture of reality relatively free of the structures of mind superimposing it, therefore reality was to be depicted as a throughflow of observations and events while resigning from immediate linking it to compounds, in terms of theme and plot, leading to falsification and myth-making. Aleksander Wat wrote many years later about his poem *Ja z jednej i Ja z drugiej strony mego mopsożelaznego piecyka (I on one side and I on the other side of my dogiron stove)* that it was "an attempt at creating a picture in analogy to modern physics, separated from *Ausschauung,*" which cannot be imagined. [5] Leon Chwistek believed that since the picture of the world that appears in human mind is of psychic nature that reaching the true image of the world is possible not by "painting life" but by "image art." [6] The leading theoretician of the Cracow avant-garde, Tadeusz Peiper, postulated that "cohesion of themes" be replaced with "cohesion of emotional result," [7] and in his antinaturalism went so far as to postulate using arbitrary order poetry, for instance, the so-called configuration of blossoming. With this "antirealism" he justified the special role of metaphor as "self-willed association of notions," as "establishing relations that have no equivalents in the real world." [8]

Umberto Eco writes that forms of art mirror the "way in which [...] mental culture of a given epoch sees the surrounding reality." [9] The avant-garde was aware of intermediary character of relation to the world not only in the cognitive aspect but also in the aspect

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[5] A. Wat, "Coś niecoś o 'Piecyku'" (A Little Bit about "Piecyk"), [in:] *Antologia polskiego futuryzmu i Nowej Sztuki,* Wrocław 1973, pp. 276—277.

[6] L. Chwistek, "Tragedia naturalizmu" (Tragedy of Naturalism), [in:] *O sztuce nowoczesnej,* Łódź 1934.

[7] T. Peiper, "Nowe usta" (New Mouth, 1925), [in:] *Tędy. Nowe usta,* Kraków 1927, p. 346.

[8] T. Peiper, "Metafora teraźniejszości" (Metaphor of the Present-day, 1922), *ibidem,* pp. 54—55.

[9] U. Eco, *Opera aperta,* Milano 1961.

of the attitude of man to nature (urbanization, civilization, machine — this means also the process of work). It can be assumed that what corresponded to it was the use of the lyrical and created subject as differentiated from the author. Adam Ważyk, after more than fifty years from his poetic debut, wrote:

> If it is possible to define fundamental tendency of the avant-garde, it was a vision of everyday life stripped of habitual relations that are imposed by the popular *Ausschauung*, of relations inculcated by inherited culture, and in particular, by poetic conventions. Hence the giving up of traditional regular verse.
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> Complete rejection of habitual relations was, of course, unattainable. The point was to introduce some reduction. The thought discourse, reasoning— it was reduced or even suspended to the benefit of the elements of description and narration, to the benefit of a vision representing the external and the internal worlds. What took place was the weakening or giving up of causal relations to the benefit of throughflow of facts, coincidence of events or imagery. [10]

This characterization pertains fully to poems by Ważyk, only partially to the Cracow avant-garde, and in the least to futurism. In Peiper's poetry the weakening of the "thought discourse" and "reasoning" was mainly done by introduction of the "metaphoric discourse." Although unexpected, metaphorical combinations of words were subordinated to the superior construction of thought and syntax yet the passing into ever newer lexical fields accounted for the fact that the clarity of the superior frame of thought was getting blurred. Justification of such poetics takes up a considerable part of Peiper's consideration. Here belongs, e.g., the Peiper theory of pseudonyms.

Marking the boundary between poetry and prose, Peiper wrote: "prose names things, poetry uses pseudonyms. Carries the reality · into a different world of the sentence creating lexical equivalents of things." [11] Pseudonym stands here for a group of words which replace the proper name of an object, it consists for its synonym in multiple words. This way tension is built between the name and what substitutes it, in what reveals the emotional attitude of the author to the object. Also, the postulate of construction ("build"), introduced in *Nowe usta* (*New Mouth*), primarily expressed the renunciation

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[10] Ważyk, *Dziwna historia awangardy*, pp. 77—78. This was linked to the unwillingness to operate with general ideas, but it was not alien to futurists.

[11] Peiper, "Nowe usta," p. 341.

of the theme-event unity as a principle of copying the world. The poetry postulated by Peiper assumed a different concept of the recipient: the concept of construction on the part of the writer had correspondence to the concept of reconstruction on the part of the reader. Reconstruction, which was based on translating the language of equivalents into the language of emotion. The reader is subjected to operation of a number of factors modelling the entirety of his psychic reactions in a manner adequate to the literary structure. The point was to eliminate such forms of approaching the "theme" when it developed outside the subject, in the background subjected to a lyrical comment. The background was to disappear being embraced by the action of the subject.

The "metaphoric discourse" of Peiper finds its equivalent in Przyboś in the form of ellipsis. If we even assume that the continuity of reasoning is not disturbed here because the reader is able to reconstruct empty slots we still may say the filling of slots is done only approximately, unexpected neighbouring of words launch into action new, marginal senses. The other pole of the poetry by Przyboś consisted in visual-situational approach to the relations between the subject and the world, i.e. departure from "reasoning" towards description, full of meaning-oriented suggestions but fragmentary and insufficiently described. In Jan Brzękowski's works the breaking up of the discursive cohesion took place by means of introducing the poetics of loose associations of dreaming, reaching to the subconscious. Towards the end of the 1920s in this poetry there was no more postulating or programming which were replaced by projections of the world. Elements of reality mix with dreams, situational frame and incoming imagery mix. The poetry of Jalu Kurek in its avant--garde course (he also practiced applied creativity in a conscious manner) was unclear, polysemantic, of loose cohesion. The poems cannot be translated into the language of discourse. From a stream of speech individual words emerge, link up with others into syntax entities, which are unclear, metaphoric, and it is difficult to grasp the relations to other segments. They act more like directional signals for imagination. In some other poems by Kurek the weakening of cohesion is done by means of distich. In extreme cases the poem breaks up into distichs which are not in any direct thematic relationship. In the volume *Upaly* (*Heat Waves*, 1925) the technique

of juxtaposition is combined with the technique of montage. In many poems there are sudden unannounced transitions from one form of expression to another. The narrating subject changes. The author's "I" is replaced with the collective subject "we" (or reversely). The effect of it is disruption of continuity, formation of a poem as a "multiplane composition," pieced together from diverse segments and diverse points of view.

At this point we can move on to the second task of the avant-garde art: building up of a new vision of social life and a new concept of man and history.

Initially, the term "avant-garde" primarily served the socio-political practice. The use of the name by any artistic orientation meant a choice of some strategy. The notion "avant-garde" assumes a linear character of the developmental process ("progress") and grants exceptional status to such a group that uses it in reference to themselves.

The avant-garde of the 20th century combines the myth of technological progress, in the European mentality continued since the 18th century, with the myth of social progress, in which elements as old as the Enlightenment (optimistic visions of future, faith in the ability of mankind to improve its lot, especially owing to amassing and spreading knowledge) united with the 19th-century social utopias (projected in future visions of "a golden age," faith in the unidirectional, "progressive" course of history, in its "rightness"). This attitude, turning artists towards these or other social or political doctrines combined itself with a praise (or apotheosis) of the development of technology and civilization as societies keep growing. Man was defined in relations with the world of nature and the social world.

In the Cracow avant-garde system man was cut off from nature and juxtaposed to it. This was the consequence of siding with civilization and technology.

> The present-day man does not stand in awe before nature but treats it as a milking cow. He managed to control it thus draws benefits. On the other hand, he looks with admiration at the products of his own head and hand. [12]

In the programmatic considerations this was the most frequent

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[12] Peiper, "Metafora teraźniejszości," p. 57.

train of thought. It turned up both in the highly acclaimed essays by Przyboś and in the works of Jalu Kurek. "We live — act in the world of things [...] Man is what he creates," claimed Przyboś. [13] In his poetry the myth Cyclop corresponded to it — a man built on a scale of the hero of the antiquity, taking up the struggle with things and becoming their master. "The cult of nature stands for capitulation of the organizing will of man before the chaos of universe," he added. [14] The surrounding world, transformed by modern civilization and devoid of secrets and surprises, was thus becoming the world of objects. Only in relations with them man can be known and described. In the Polish tradition this attitude linked up with the thoughts of Stanisław Brzozowski and his concept of work as the foundation of any value.

Simultaneously: Peiper's understanding of man, antinaturalistic in principle, combined with the slogan of overcoming nature around and in man. Similarly as in Przyboś, who declared that "man — — Sisiphus of ideas [...] brings himself to order by obedience." [15]

Man is defined in Peiper's works in social categories, as a member of a collective. A special place was given here to the sphere of mind, "conscious will," which are able to control the power of instincts. A pragmatic reduction was taking place: a picture emerged of personality devoid of metaphysical problems and limited to its own activities. This also involved elimination of classical intro-spection; self-knowledge may take place only in interaction with the surroundings. One of the most famous slogans of the paper published by Peiper, *Zwrotnica*, talked exactly about the "mass." Writing that "the mass-society and the mass-crowd are ever more strongly affecting man's awareness," justifying the need for "order," Peiper mentioned such factors of new life as making easier, saving of time and effort, lining "life with comfort." [16] Thus, the growth

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[13] J. Przyboś, "Człowiek w rzeczach" (Man in Things, 1926), [in:] *Linia i gwar*, vol. 1, Kraków 1959, p. 14.

[14] J. Przyboś, "Człowiek nad przyrodą" (Man over Nature, 1926), *ibidem*, p. 18.

[15] J. Przyboś, "O elektryfikacji" (On Electrification), [in:] *Oburącz*, Kraków 1926.

[16] T. Peiper, "Miasto, masa, maszyna" (Town, Mass, Machine, 1922), [in:] *Tędy. Nowe usta*, p. 37.

of immediate tasks was taken into account and the principle of usefulness was introduced. The basis for evaluation of man and his assets was the social usefulness of his acts and deeds. Hence, he was approached in "the closest functional dependence." [17] Because:

> The functional relation linking human life and based on limitations of freedom, leads to goods that may become a source of common happiness, providing that social economy is restructured and put in order, and the truth of this fact is in the emotions of people and slowly permeates their thoughts as well. [18]

Przyboś accompanied this very programme with his article "Idea rygoru" in which he praised the "dogma of purposefulness of absolute need conditioning the presence of every element." [19]

The third task of the avant-garde concerned primarily the relations between art and social transformations. To the fundamental question asked by the independence Peiper responded in a moralistic spirit. Adoption of specific premises of the world-outlook produced specific postulates. As to art – it was above all the awareness that it was a social fact. The avant-garde wanted to alter the life of man and societies. Art was to take up – in a new way – its social service. Suffice to recall several formulations by Peiper: "certain sequences of events and emotions are imposed on the reader with word arrangements" – "without his knowledge and will." "To build new tracks in imaginations means to restructure the largest of the worlds." [20] The art is to co-operate in creating a new man. In this way, that after Wiktor Shklovski may be called "deautomatization of catch," it alters the psyche of the recipient, makes it more flexible, ready to accept all novelties. The work of an artist undergoes desacration and is equalled with the work of an artisan. Peiper called himself a "word craftsman"; "we work in word," added Kurek.

Following Adriano Marino, if we define avant-gardism as a certain attitude then we can assume that:

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[17] *Ibidem*, p. 39.

[18] T. Peiper, "Droga rymu" (The Way of Rhyme, 1929), *ibidem*, p. 74.

[19] J. Przyboś, "Idea rygoru" (The Idea of Rigour, 1927), [in:] *Linia i gwar*, vol. 1, p. 9.

[20] T. Peiper: "Rozbijanie tworzydeł," [in:] *Tędy. Nowe usta*, pp. 91, 94; "Sztuka a proletariat" (Art and Proletariat, 1926), *ibidem*, p. 139.

What determines and inspires the attitude of breaking away in its most provocative and exalted aspects, is the state of profound, continuous and violent revolt toward all domains of life, it is a form of total insurrection which transforms itself into a true complex of aggressiveness.[21]

This aggressiveness within the Cracow avant-garde was mainly aimed at the past, it meant breaking away with tradition. Ważyk pointed out: "The novelty-oriented movement did not grow out of staring stubbornly into the artistic past in any domain so that in the poetic vision there was no room for admiration of the old works of art."[22] In the early avant-garde poetry references to the old works of art generally bear a parodistic character.

The attitude to the past was linked among the avant-gardists with a special form of "Hegelian bite," a conviction about merciless historical process driving in a specific, foreseeable direction: faith in historical progress had its analogy in the faith in progress of art and literature. (It is characteristic that S. I. Witkiewicz also came under the spell of this faith, although he put his value signs reversely.) At this point the thinking of the avant-garde came across many antynomies. If art was to be an instrument of social transformations, should not the criterion of value take into account effectiveness of social functioning? The second issue was linked with the question of the level of the recipient. Futurists wanted to enclose their art in a model of mass culture. Elements of this behaviour are still with Kurek (tendency to use advertising, introduction of current elements, the so-called applied poetry). But it is only in Brzękowski that phenomena of mass culture became an object of reflections, and parodistic reflections, at that. Brzękowski in a relentlessly penetrating manner watched their artificial character. He builds new entities, plots and pictures as if using building blocks. It turns out at this point that the sphere of artificiality embraces even those domains which until then were under a guarantee of authenticity. Peiper simply believed that the avant-garde literature is the "provider of providers," i.e. it supplies specialized means for popular literature.

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[21] A. Marino, "Essai d'une définition de l'avant-garde," *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 1975, no. 1. Quot. after: Gazda, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[22] Ważyk, *Dziwna historia awangardy*, p. 78.

The most fascinating thinking in the avant-garde was the thinking in whole entities. Tadeusz Peiper wrote: "A phonetic play reveals a world outlook."[23] Art was understood here in connection with an entire social system and other domains of art. If we were to use our contemporary formulations we could say that he saw the homology of structures, the level of artistic means and the level of world-outlooks.

And, finally, the fourth task concerning the outlining of an artistic transformations programme. In literature this programme exclusively dealt with poetry. It introduced elements of conscious construction, the role of metaphor as a means for revealing inner experiences of the artist, and above all, it was bringing out the special use of language in poetry, the problems of polysemy and contextuality. Words are to be surprised at one another, wrote Peiper, as if referring to Horace's ideas. The idea of construction permitting— for the purpose of concord with experiences— violation of real objective relations, the postulate of keeping restraint in expressing emotions, the principle of intermediacy, the cult of poetic sentence and metaphor— these were the main points of this programme.

A certain model of applied poetics was established, with a particular contribution of Przyboś, and this model was a criterion of belonging to the avant-garde movement in the 1930s. Here are its main components:

1. A lyrical monologue is an indirect, metaphorical statement. Its basic unit is a sentence ("metaphoric sentence") as a place for unexpected combinations of words and use of polysemy. It may take on different forms, for instance collisions of two meaningful contexts of a word, which often finds, particularly in Przyboś, its extension in mutual permeation of words from two semantic fields (e.g. "umierać na krzyżu z brązu" — to die on a cross of bronze: Przyboś, *Parada śmierci— Death parade*); a surprising discovery of a word sense by literalization of a common metaphor or idiom, or calling up a fictitious or real word etymology (e.g. "tonem z głębi: tonią"— tone from depth: depth: Przyboś, *Rzeki— Rivers*); a metaphorical description of a given object together with its true name (e.g. "powietrze: lustro zdmuchnięte" — air: mirror blown away:

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[23] Peiper, "Droga rymu," p. 64.

Przyboś, *Krajobraz— Landscape*); an elliptical sentence (e.g. "Powietrze uduszone sztandarami" — Air choked by banners: Przyboś, *Równanie serca— Heart equation*); such a use of a word that it is to be cut off the object and act only as a sign of some value (e.g. "miód niosą na paznokciach" — They carry honey on fingernails: Peiper, *Czyli— So*).

2. A poem is a statement in which the intonation-syntax division is superior to the division into verses. It is combined with breaking away from traditional versification based on metric forms. Thus the so-called the avant-garde free verse of diverse implementations develops.

3. Within a lyrical statement there is a constant building up of new states of affairs by means of using metaphorical constructions in which the object reveals its attitude to the world. This replaces a description or relation about an experience. In the course of the statement the stand of "I" towards the object of an experience gains precision and a new order is formed. The lyrical subject is dynamic in character and is established in the course of the statement being made, in reference to the past emotional states. This finds its expression both in the two-plane construction of a poem (e.g. Przyboś, *Wieczór— Evening*), and in, for instance, the so-called creative figure (when the world emerges as if in the course of perceiving).

The writings of Przyboś and Brzękowski in the 1930s produced a departure from Peiper's assumptions by introduction of the category of "image" ("vision"). "Unity of vision," referred to by Przyboś, was to stand for its homogeneity and for adding precision to the spatial situation of the subject. Brzękowski also wrote about the "unity of vision in poetry." In 1933 Brzękowski presented his concept of integral poetry, as the one in which unification of a spontaneous creative act with the controlling activity of the mind was to take place. Essays by Przyboś and Brzękowski, polemics in periodicals, these permitted reformulation of some postulates of avant-gardism in poetry. "Vision," "imagination," "image" became central categories in it.

Postulates of new poetic groups coming to life in the 1930s went in a similar direction. The groups were often jointly called the second avant-garde. New poetics were arising and taking up the concepts of *Zwrotnica*, mainly in their departure from directness

in lyrical poetry, in recognizing creative and not re-creative character
of a poetic piece, in its new versification. However, "imagination"
and "poetic image"– as in Przyboś and Brzękowski– came to be
the main categories here.

What does that avant-garde represent to us today? To be sure,
one of the most important components of the modern literary
tradition, although it is not sometimes possible to separate precisely
the influence of various formations oriented on new approaches.
It passed through literature shaking up all of its notions. Metaphors
by Słonimski or Tuwim can be described with categories known
earlier, they were just some poetic figures and served the better
illustration of thoughts or served the purpose of bringing closer
together some ranges of reality. Now, after Peiper, they turned
out to be "creating notional unions which correspond to nothing
in the real world," they spoke more about the poet then about
an object of his statements. Naturally, the utopian constructivism
of Peiper seems to be seriously anachronic. Similarly, at any rate
to all civilizational utopias of the beginning of this century. "Any
innovatory movement has its date," Adam Ważyk used to say.
In the 1920s the avant-garde thought was primarily a pattern to
follow when "breaking away," rebelling against tradition, a pattern
to follow in combining an aesthetic programme with transformations
of modern civilization. In the 1930s the main assumptions of the
avant-garde poetics (construction, intermediacy, new versification
forms) were treated in the avant-garde spirit as beyond any discussion.
They were the starting point for new proposals and at the same
time formed a bridge of understanding. A special fashion for
avant-gardism developed both among those writing and those receiv-
ing it, largely a young student public. After the war the tradition
of the avant-garde was permanently present as a pattern in poetry,
e.g. in the work of Tadeusz Różewicz. Banished from handbooks
and absent during literary discussions during the Stalin period, it
made its comeback in 1956 as a permanent element of our heritage.
Now it represented, first of all, a struggle for rejuvenation of poetic
means, for doing away with the banal. Peiper returns to the literature
as a great forerunner of the avant-garde poetry, understood as the
poetry of restraint, notional and linguistic. In the 1960s other elements
from his work were picked up, he became an exemplary concerned

citizen unwilling to put up with the surrounding world. The New Wave poets of that generation unravelled from his slogans rebellion and anxiety. "Non-confidence" of this poetry, its programmatic opposition to the language made banal by mass media clearly link it to Peiper. The 1980s, on the other hand, rather conducive to metaphysical problems, brought about a certain decline in interest about the avant-garde. It has become largely an object of "ordinary," detailed research, as if it went into oblivion.

Transl. by *Bogdan Lawendowski*