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Literary Modernism: Ambiguity of the Term and Dichotomy of the Movement

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Among many literary problems and terms which attract the attention of Western scholars, literary modernism¹ occupies today one of the leading places, and it can be said without any exaggeration that the number of articles, studies, books and special editions of learned journals may successfully compete with the multitude of research material devoted to feminism, poststructuralism, cultural studies and even postmodernism. Understandably, in all these discussions the Anglo-American point of view clearly prevails and most often it is limited to the linguistic expanse of the English language. A new tendency, however, emerged in recent years when this term was applied in a broader comparative and international perspective, reaching beyond the borders of Great Britain and North America. This process of "internationalization" of the meaning of the term and the scope of its inquiry is of a twofold nature: in search of new examples which would support their claims, Anglo-American scholars seem to be inclined to go beyond the confines of English and American literature; on the other hand, research conducted outside of this cultural sphere displays a tendency to adopt the comprehension of modernism in the sense established by the Anglo-American literary tradition. The most recent example of this change proved to be the international conference organized in 1993 by the University of Antwerp in Belgium.

However, the real interpretative break-through, aimed at a broader view of modernism occurred considerably earlier with the publication of the book *Modernism 1890-1930*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane in 1976, and reedited since then several times. In this publication, under the sign-

1 One can find quite a comprehensive bibliography of studies devoted to modernism in Fokkema and Ibsch 2-3.

board of "modernism" one can find a discussion of various artistic currents such as symbolism, impressionism, expressionism, futurism, dadaism, imagism which came into existence at the turn of the nineteenth century. Some analytical remarks are also included about writers who remain seemingly so far apart in their literary practice as, for example, V. Majakovskij and T.S. Eliot. Obviously, according to the authors of this book, the above mentioned artistic currents can be treated as manifestations of national variants of the same phenomenon, that is, modernism which is characterized by the rejection of the aesthetics based on mimetic principles (subversion of realism), extreme subjectivism in the perception of the outer world and introversion. This term, when applied to literature would encompass a long stretch of time — the last decade of the nineteenth century and up to the end of World War II or the early fifties. Modernism, understood in such a broad manner looks like a mechanically formed conceptual cluster rather than a coherent movement with some definable aesthetic laws of its own. In their introductory chapters the editors of the volume do not show any predisposition for a theoretical explicitness of their stand nor do they try to postulate any consistent comparative method to investigate the problem in question. This kind of approach will be taken by Astradur Eysteinnson in a very informative and excellent book entitled *The Concept of Modernism*.² Eysteinnson's study is based on solid evidence and gives an excellent survey and account of various interpretative possibilities of the term. The author distinguishes himself by far reaching caution in formulating opinions of his own and at the same time hints rather than proclaims himself to be in favor of a broader understanding of modernism. If Eysteinnson limits his study to literature only, Christopher Butler in his book *Early Modernism. Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900-1916* makes an attempt to give a syncretic view of modernism, taking into his consideration literature, music and painting. It is worth mentioning that Butler, a professor at Oxford, expands the term modernism over the artistic practice of the entire European continent.

The interest shown by scholars in modernism is highly understandable on all accounts. First of all there exists the need to describe if not define the modernist period as such, and to delineate its boundaries. It seems, however, that the difficulties of defining its essence, of marking out its territory and chronology reflect in a metaphorical manner the pluralistic nature of art in the twentieth century, which is characterized by hitherto unprecedented multidirectionality (multidimensionality) and its ambiguity caused by the progressing disintegration of traditional ethic and aesthetic values. In their introductory article "The Name and Nature of Modernism," the above mentioned authors M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane maintain that since the

time of romanticism the ever growing novel and experimental tendencies in art have reached their culmination in modernism and attained in it the state of crisis, that is, the frittering away and lack of consensus, the inability to accept one common point of view; to support this claim the authors refer to W.B. Yeats's well-known formulation: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold." Consequently, it can be said without any shade of exaggeration that as far as the search for a positive solution is concerned (that is, finding a formula) which would lead to rapprochement of various interpretative approaches and formulations of modernism, no other period-term ever posed to critics and theoreticians of literature so many difficulties as modernism did. There is yet another reason for the great interest modernism provokes: the powerful wave of postmodernism and the incredible number of publications devoted to it caused the need, even necessity to discuss the preceding period, modernism. We can find a good exemplification of this sort of interdependence in a very interesting study of postmodernist fiction by B. McHale in which he writes the following:

Postmodern is not post modern, whatever that may mean, but post modernism; it does not come after the present (a solecism), but after the *modernist movement*. Thus the term "postmodernism" if we take it literally enough, *à la lettre*, signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future. (5, my emphasis)

Following these considerations, B. McHale formulates two different dominants for modernist and postmodernist fiction. The first one is of an epistemological nature and in the second, ontological features clearly prevail. In other words, the transition from modernism to postmodernism implies a shift from the question of cognition to the problem of existence. It is not my aim to discuss McHale's thesis. The reason I refer to it is to demonstrate how the attempts to deal with postmodernism inspire the need to examine the period which preceded postmodernism. In what follows below I intend to concentrate on two issues: 1) to discuss the term modernism from the point of view of a comparative perspective; 2) to describe those major aspects of this powerful artistic movement which determine, in my view, its specificity and essence.

THE MEANINGS OF THE TERM

We are fully aware of the dangers and traps which lie in wait for the daredevil who ventures to raise the above questions because one can immediately express doubt: is it not obvious what we have in mind when we speak of modernism? Or: are we not falling again into endless and fruitless

2 Among newer publications on the subject one should mention an interesting study by L. Surette *The Birth of Modernism. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult*.

terminological disputes concerning incongruities which in the past divided historians of literature, for example, in relation to the definition of "realism"? Moreover, suggestions and inferences which we intend to present may appear to be arbitrary and not necessarily sufficiently substantiated, but we would like to emphasize that we do not propose any "ultimate" solutions because such solutions do not exist; rather our intention is to set forth a theoretical scheme which requires further considerations and complementary argumentation. In the end they may lead to a better understanding of the problem in question. After all, it is worth mentioning that in the past, terms such as "romanticism" or "realism" evoked heated debates and even today one is not entirely in agreement as to their scope and interpretation,³ but by and large literary scholars agree with regard to at least some of their modal and substantive properties. Obviously there may occur chronological shifts within the limits of various national literatures but this does not change the understanding reached on the international scale. Such a degree of consensus does not exist in relation to the term modernism: when applied to isolated (single) national literatures it refers most often to chronologically different (longer or shorter) literary periods or groups and often it determines qualitatively distinct, at least seemingly incomparable artistic phenomena. On that score, "modernism" occupies an exceptional position in literary terminology. Even without making a special effort, one can enumerate six, seven or even more meanings of this word, which functions as a literary term in different national literatures.⁴ In some instances it points to small literary groups, in other it signifies vast artistic movements, determined mainly by the specificity

3 Professor V. Nemoianu in his book *The Taming of Romanticism. Literature and the Age of Biedermeier* (1984a), questions the view that countries of Central and Eastern Europe ever went through the period of full-fledged romanticism; he suggests that in the first half of the nineteenth century the dominant style in this part of Europe was Biedermeier. See my polemics with his position in "Slavic Literatures as a Distinct Subject of Studies: The Case of Romanticism" (see Możejko 1991). Partly but indirectly a response to this question can be found in Możejko and Dirmić.

4 For my short observation to this effect see Możejko 1983, 30. A typical example of a small modernist group can be found in Serbian literature. I have in mind such writers as Rasko Petrović, Miloš Crnjanski, Stanišavlje Vinaver, Todor Manojlović, Ranko Mladenović and others. In order to be aware of the differences in which the term "modernism" could be interpreted within a national literature see Wyka's *Modernizm polski*. Some other publications are helpful too (e.g., see Bobrownicka's *Modernizm w literaturach słowiańskich*). It is particularly interesting to compare these publications with studies written in English, Spanish and Scandinavian languages. An interesting study on Czech modernist poetry was written by Polish Slavist Z. Niedziela: *Kierunki rozwojowe czeskiej poezji modernistycznej*. Recent publications ought to be mentioned as well: B. Baran's *Postmodernizm* (1992), especially the chapters "Moderna" ("Modernity") and "Modernizm literacki" ("Literary Modernism"). Interesting comments regarding the question of modernism as a literary term can be found in the article by R. Nycz's "Literatura postmodernistyczna" and his recent *Język modernizmu: prolegomena historycznoliterackie*.

of a given cultural tradition.

We are primarily interested here in the latter case. It seems that one can distinguish four cultural spheres in which this term is used in a more all-embracing and generalized sense:

1) "die Moderne," as a concept created and developed in the German literary tradition and adopted with certain modifications in the countries of Central and partly Eastern Europe; it was used for the first time by H. Bahr as the title of the journal *Die Moderne* and in his book *Zur Kritik der Moderne* (1891). The term came to mean a blend of some vague, contradictory but most often pessimistic feelings expressed through the medium of decadent, symbolist and impressionist writing.

2) Latin-American and Spanish "modernismo" which arose a decade earlier than the German "Modernismus" (I have particularly in mind its Latin-American offshoot); it represented a reaction against the monotony of naturalism and became a means of search for the renewal of literature by freeing it from the one-sided influence of the "mother-country" Spain by a broader opening to other European artistic currents, particularly those of French literature. In its final Spanish stage (also known as the "generation 98") "modernismo" developed into an extreme individualism coupled at times with quite a radical social protest tinged by nihilism.⁵

3) The third interpretation of modernism as a long-lasting period in art and literature of the twentieth century grows out of the Anglo-American experience which took place between the years 1910-40 (sometimes the final caesura is shifted to 1945 or even 1950). It stands for what is often referred to as imagism or in its earlier stage as classicism.

4) In this case the interpretation of modernism follows not so much out of cultural specificity as it does from a world-outlook inspired by Marxist ideology which expounds the thesis about the dualistic nature of art in the twentieth century, consisting of the perpetual clash and opposition of two global artistic attitudes realism and modernism. A prominent exponent of this approach was G. Lukács (see 1962, 17-92), and it found its official approval and institutionalization in the Soviet Union where the term "modernism" was reduced to a negative concept, summarizing under this label all possible "isms" as manifestations of decadent bourgeois culture.⁶ Thus this term became a part of newspeak, a lexical cluster without precise semantic boundaries, devoid of meaning and used as a tool of ideological propaganda. It is worth adding that also in pre-revolutionary Russia (and then later in

5 The book by Ned J. Davidson *The Concept of Modernism in Hispanic Criticism* (1966), translated into Spanish under the title *El Concepto de modernismo en la crítica hispánica* still remains an irreplaceable source of information about Hispanic "modernismo."

6 Even in the period of advanced "perestroika" one wrote there about modernism as a manifestation of decadent bourgeois art (see Vanslov and Sokolov, particularly the chapter "Modernizm — krizis burżuaznogo iskusstva").

emigration) many prominent Russian writers nourished a rather unfavorable opinion about modernism; A. Blok, for example, maintained that it is an outgrowth or formation artificially implanted on Russian soil, alien to its national culture.⁷

Among the four possible designations of modernism as a large artistic period, the Anglo-American term, when applied in relation to British or American literature, clearly shifts its beginnings to the twentieth century, with stress put on imagism as its early exemplification. Literary criticism of this cultural sphere by and large agrees on the principal aesthetic features of the "great modernist break-through." But what kind of solution can be found by a comparatist who wants to apply this term in a broader, all-embracing, synthetic sense which would encompass both its temporal and territorial boundaries in conjunction with the characterization of its aesthetic premises in order to achieve international consensus in using the term "modernism" as a helpful literary-aesthetic category, denoting at the same time a long lasting artistic period. Is it possible? The answer seems to be prudently affirmative provided that one takes two somewhat more thorough investigative measures: first, one should examine more closely the relationship between the end of the nineteenth century, often referred to as symbolism (or neoromanticism) and what is defined in Anglo-American criticism as the "great modernist break-through" of the twentieth century; second, one can achieve a certain degree of assent by introducing more accurate usage and transposing the employment of some critical literary terms — an issue I shall address below. In the first instance, one would have to revise the indurated view which treats experimental currents, existing prior to or during the First World War (expressionism, imagism, futurism), exclusively as a reaction against decadentism, individualism, symbolism, the slogan "art for art's sake" and so on. On this score some interesting comments can be found in Butler who suggests that early modernists (of course in the Anglo-American meaning of the word) further developed the principle of art's autonomy formulated before them by symbolists, and at the same time adopted their conviction that creative artistic activity is based on subjectivism and that it ought to be of an expressive nature (Butler 3). In such an interpretation the modernist movement begins to stand out as a great, that is, larger and longer lasting artistic (and literary) epoch which evolves through various stages of development. Of course, this problem requires a more detailed analysis which exceeds the limits of this article, but it comes close to the conception formulated in the sixties by the Danish poet and critic Poul Borum in his book *Poetisk modernisme (Poetic Modernism)*. According to him the sources

and forerunners of modernism are to be looked for in the mid nineteenth century in the writings of such poets as Ch. Baudelaire, A. Rimbaud, S. Mallarmé; it is interesting to note that he numbers among this group the Polish poet C.K. Norwid. Borum characterized him as an early modernist who paved the way for the mature modernist poetry of the twentieth century. To Borum modernism is a historico-literary term similar to that of renaissance, baroque or romanticism which also denote great literary epochs and imply "novelty" or "renewal" of art and literature. The beginnings of its lower boundary go back to the mid nineteenth century, and the upper ceasura reaches as far as the fifties of the twentieth century. Modernism does not express a single idea or style; it is a complex of simultaneously existing and mutually complementing but at the same time opposing styles of expressions and views. Borum revives Baudelaire's view that modernism was an expression of modern society which began to take shape in Europe after 1848 (he has in mind two of Baudelaire's articles: "Salon of 1846" and "The Painter of Modern Life" about the paintings of C. Guys).

As I mentioned before, the thesis about literary modernism as a long lasting historical period gains ever more advocates but it lacks much in a concrete methodological justification and conceptual rigor which would allow one to seize the entire problem within a more precise theoretical framework. An attempt to undertake such a task was made by Dutch scholars D.W. Fokkema and E. Ibsch. To do justice to a fuller presentation of the ongoing debate about modernism, we would like to give a short synopsis of their position. It differs from the above mentioned concepts proposed by Ch. Butler and P. Borum in that they confine the notion of modernism to a certain type of the twentieth century prose which includes such writers as V. Woolf, T. Mann, M. Proust, J. Joyce, A. Gide, I. Svevo, and so on. In justifying their point of view, Fokkema and Ibsch invoke the conception of a modernist social code, which excludes from its realm not only various twentieth century "isms" but also literary genres other than prose; an exception is made for T.S. Eliot and just a few other poets. The Dutch authors have immensely enriched the understanding of the modernist current in prose but one would wish they expand the scope of its meaning. Their study may, of course, raise some questions. Is it possible for the term "modernism" to be limited almost exclusively or primarily to prose? The above mentioned exception concerning T.S. Eliot elicits more problems than it provides possible alternative solutions. Moreover, the limitation of the term modernism to a definite type of narration creates a terminological vacuum in relation to the entire twentieth century art and literature being denoted by this term without offering anything in exchange. In addition, the question may be asked if some formal proprieties ascribed by the authors of *Modernist Conjectures* to the modernist social code appear in other types of prose (e.g., metafictional commentary is present not only in modernist prose, the role of

7 Detailed comments on this subject can be found in Gibian and Tjalsma. Wladimir Weidle, a well known émigré critic who discusses Blok's literary views writes about the "poison of modernism" (18-30).

the reader as a participant in the creative process is not only important in narrative prose but also in other literary genres).

The question about the option regarding the understanding of the term modernism, that is, its narrow interpretation vs. a broad one, presents us with a difficult dilemma. The answer depends to a great extent on the way we formulate our strategic goals. I am in favor of treating modernism in its broad meaning. Such an approach compels one to find a common denominator, that is, a set of common features indicating a certain cohesion of an epoch which has passed but in a sense is still with us (at least through the postmodernist extension), and incessantly intrigues the curiosity of students. To this end I would like to suggest a few possible albeit hypothetical solutions. They are concerned primarily with terminology and aimed at its more accurate use.

We shall begin with a comparison. The wish of a comparatist to accept the understanding of modernism from the perspective of the Anglo-American cultural tradition is tempting but it immediately encounters an impediment in that it has to face a "competitive," so to speak, term, namely the *avant-garde*. Like modernism, this term is conditioned and burdened by some cultural codes. Renato Poggioli was fully aware of it when thirty years ago he wrote, not without a certain dose of irony, the following: "Speaking literally and linguistically rather than figuratively or ideally, Anglo-American culture is surely not wrong in treating the term 'avant-garde art' as if it were a Gallicism: the formula and concept are of a not easily identifiable origin, but clearly French, indeed clearly Parisian" (8). Also in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (The Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Hungary, former Yugoslavia), one accepted this term as a denotation of the literary transformation which began in the first decade of the twentieth century and came to a close with the outbreak of World War II. In the mid eighties, Jean Weisgerber edited his monumental two volume work entitled *Les avant-gardes littéraires au XX siècle* devoted to the most important experimental currents of the twentieth century. The problems and material analyzed in this work are very similar to, if not identical with what we find in the book published by M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane *Modernism 1890-1930*. In other words, the difference in both titles have been determined by two distinct literary cultures. How strongly such factors may influence and determine intellectual outlook, maturity and perspective may be proved by the example of R. Poggioli himself: after many years spent in the US, he did not accept the term "modernism" and retained the title of his book on *avant-garde*, translated from the Italian, as *The Theory of Avant-Garde*. At the same time he made the point that within its framework such writers as T.S. Eliot can find their place. However, in spite of acknowledging the importance of these cultural conditionings, one should still ask the question whether they are the only reason of the "interchangeability" of the terms "modernism" and "avant-garde." Is there behind such a "synonymity" hidden, perhaps, something

immanent in the texts of this epoch which permits this terminological dualism to exist? Does not this dualism by any chance hint at some deeper hidden characteristics of this epoch and point to its peculiar syncretism of artistic realizations?

THE DICHOTOMY OF MODERNISM: BETWEEN CLASSICISM AND AVANT-GARDE

The syncretic character of modern literary currents has been noticed many a time, yet the question to be asked is whether this syncretism is a chaotic conglomeration of ideas and artistic devices or can we speak of a certain systemic order which may lead to the establishment of some typological categories and artistic phenomena placed under the label of modernism? To answer this question one should be aware of the practice in Western literary criticism which consisted mainly of using the term modernism in relation to experimental literature of rather moderate bent which did not ignore the tradition of past artistic experience; the term *avant-garde*, on the other hand, was practically reserved for extreme artistic experiments, which called for breaking off (most often by noisy and iconoclastic manifestoes) with the legacy of past cultural achievements. As the years went by, a third term began to gain ground, in Poland, for example, used even more so than in the West, namely, classicism (c.f. Rymkiewicz, also Przybylski). This coincided with a more serious interest for this term in the West (see Kermode, Konstantinović et al.). Thus, one began gradually to identify the term "classicism" with the denotation of the artistic current of a more "preservative" nature and to replace *modernism* as its main watch-word. It is worth mentioning here that both T.E. Hulme and T.S. Eliot proposed at the early stage of their activity to name the "great artistic break-through" classicism. It was not until later, and due to the continuous transformation of the theoretical premises and artistic practice, that one opted for the term modernism as the more appropriate one. However, if released from its "double" role (that is as a denomination for both a narrower, moderate current and the great artistic upheaval which lasted longer than half a century), modernism can and begins in my view to function exclusively as the name for a long-lasting artistic epoch based on dichotomy between new classicism and *avant-garde*. The latter gains in precision as the opposition to the classical type of creative endeavor; and modernism can be understood as a constant tension between these two variants of the same artistic invariant. All the above mentioned four meanings of modernism, conditioned by cultural differences, share one common characteristic which implies "newness" and assumes incessant transformation. This creative program and its artistic expression is realized by invoking the concept of *avant-garde* as a means by which the principle of artistic

modernization and innovation is constantly implemented.⁸ There operates, on the other hand, an opposite principle aimed at assuaging the impetuous move towards newness and invoking the need to base creative experiment on somewhat more solid cerebral, intellectual grounds. When F. Nietzsche formulated his well-known differentiation between Apollonian and Dionysian art, he referred his dichotomy not so much to the past — he splendidly predicted the coexistence of these two creative elements in a new epoch. Or, it can be also claimed that such a view can find a justification to some extent in the Hegelian distinction between symbolic (oriental), classical (Greek) and romantic (Christian) modes of creativity. In other words, one can perceive modernism as a continuation and hybrid or specific integration of the classical/romantic tradition both preoccupied, as we know, in one way or another with human spirituality and subjective experience. If we take a closer look at national literatures of the first half of this century one can easily ascertain the coexistence of these two currents: in Russia futurism vs. Acmeism, in Ukraine futurism vs. neoclassicism, in Poland the Cracow avant-garde vs. Skamander (and so called "second avant-garde"). In Italian literature one can discern the opposition between hermeticism and futurism. To be sure, this duality, albeit in a different methodological context and purpose, has been noted by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-garde* (70). According to him classicists "treat their material as something living" and "respect its significance as something that has grown from concrete life situations." For a classicist, "the material is carrier of a meaning." For the avant-gardistes on the other hand, material is "just that, material" an empty sign "to which only they can impart significance" or, in other words, they intend to kill the "life" of the material. If classicists tend to create a living picture of totality even when "limiting the represented reality segment to the rendition of an ephemeral mood," avant-gardistes tear the material out of reality and turn it into a fragment with the intent of positing or disposing meaning.

A. In what follows, the understanding of classicism is based primarily on T.S. Eliot's essays "The Classics and the Man of Letters," "Ulysses," "Order and Myth" and his famous article "Tradition and the Individual Talent." As he emphasized the necessity to appropriate both Greek and Latin classical heritage, T.S. Eliot puts the stress on the need to preserve in our collective memory the entire Mediterranean literary past, including second rate and minor poets. This kind of approach implies that experimentation is possible on the basis of continuity which the artist unsettles by his/hers original and creative intervention or intrusion. Eliot is exactly a propagator of this type of artistic experiments, but at the same time he does not preclude and more importantly he does not reject yet another possibility of renewing literature when he writes that "we meet poets with a sense of the past only or,

8 "Modernity," writes Calinescu, "has opened the path to the rebellious avant-gardes" (5).

alternatively, poets whose hope of the future is based on the attempt to renounce the past" (58).

Almost simultaneously yet independently of T.S. Eliot, a similar albeit not identical concept of classicism was promulgated by O. Mandelstam. In his articles "The Word and Culture," "Concerning the Nature of the Word" or in other statements he formulated classicism as "a longing after the world's culture" (1966a, 266, my translation).

... poets of today speak languages of all times and all cultures. Nothing is impossible. As the room of a dying individual is open to all, so is the door of the world: it is thrown wide open to the crowd. All of a sudden everything becomes the property of all. Go and take. Everything is available: all labyrinths, all mysteries, all forbidden passages... [In a syncretical poet] ... ideas, scientific systems, state theories sing just as in his predecessors nightingales and roses sang.⁹ (Mandelstam 1966a, 269, my translation)

We can speak here of two variants of the same artistic phenomenon. The difference between these two poets seems to consist of their understanding of the *function* of classical poetry. While the English poet treats it as a means of warning against the progressing disintegration of modern civilization due to the possibility of its rupture with the past and loss of historical perspective, Mandelstam tends to see classicism as the dawn of new times. The basis of new variants of classical poetry constitute strong intertextual affinities and bonds with the literary heritage of the preceding epochs; "in its mature versions," writes Miłosz, "it is literature nourished by literature" (30-31, my translation, ["w jego dojrzałych odmianach jest to literatura żywiąca się literaturą"]); furthermore, it fosters the image of the poet as erudite. A classicist remains aware of the word's shaky status and the instability of its semantics but at the same time feels a strong attachment to it and still treats it with traditional piety as bearer of meaning. Instead of destabilizing it, s/he tends to lend the word a more tangible communicative value, yet at the same time makes use of its polysemic nature. Finally, it should be mentioned that modern classical poetry exploits traditional values of the past (myths, religious thought, aesthetic conventions, social and political concepts, folklore etc.). A classical poet subjects them to his/her own intellectual scrutiny and formal treatment yet at the same time takes a depersonalized stand, preserves a certain distance in relation to these values while confronting them with his own epoch, with contemporary questions of human existence. At times such

9 "... poëty goworjaj na jazyke vsch vremen', vsch kul'tur. Net ničego nevozmožnogo. Kak komnata umirajuščego otkryta dlja vsch, tak dver' starogo mira nastež' raspannuta pered tolpoj. Vnezapno vsë stalo dostojaniem obščim. Idite i berite. Vsë dostupno: vse labirinty, vse tajniki, vse zapovednye xody ... V nëm [sintetičeskom poëte] pojut idei, naučnye sistemy, gosudarstvennye teorii tak že točno, kak v ego predšestvennikax peľi solov'y i rozy."

poetic strategy lends to modern classical poetry an ironic tinge but above all it brings into relief a reflexive dimension and philosophical depth.¹⁰

B. And what are the conventions or formal thematic determinants of those poets whose "hope of the future (as T.S. Eliot puts it) is founded upon the attempt to renounce the past" (58)? Here we have a range of currents distinct by their extreme zest for radical experimentation combined often with strong social and political commitment, challenging the cultural past or rejecting it all-together. Compared to classicism, they constitute the opposite pole of modernism by stressing the anti-traditionalist urge for innovation, the proclamation of noisy manifestoes, the drive for obscurity and the uncontrolled desire to shock the public; they display a programmatic "anti-literariness" by breaking with established aesthetic canons and often laying the literary devices bare to demonstrate the "artificiality" of the creative act. To use Y.M. Lotman's differentiation between styles of identification and styles of dissimilarity we can say that classicism belongs to the former and the avant-gardists current to the latter.

Against the reflexive mode of classicist poetry the avant-gardists set an activist desire of having an immediate impact on the reader. If classicists relate to the past in a positive response and see in it a source for new creativity, their avant-gardist counterparts display a demonstrative negativism. The classicist creative discipline and order are countered by flightiness of style; intellectual challenge is often opposed by irrational defiance; the extreme formal experimentation, primitivism and thematic radicalism of the avant-garde is balanced, as it were, or countered by classicist moderation with regard to both these aspects of artistic creativity. It is our view that the very essence of modernism rests on the above-mentioned oppositions and tensions.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS: TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS

This abbreviated (and simplified) characterization of the two artistic currents determines, in my view, the essence of modernism as a conglomeration of the above described antinomies and seeming contradictions. This kind of approach to modernism opens the way to a better understanding of such literary phenomena as Acmeism or the Anglo-American imagism. Now they can be treated not as "exceptional" or "atypical" artistic accomplishments which are lying outside the main stream of the literary process in the first decades of the twentieth century (most often identified with the avant-garde), but as its legitimate components, the other pole of the same process.

However, at this point questions might be asked as to whether the above mentioned dichotomy implies a juxtaposition of antithetical phenomena

which coexist beside each other in a mechanical way, without having any common characteristics, two currents that flow beside each other without a common mouth at which they meet? These are most difficult questions concerning modernism understood as a long-lasting and complex literary epoch. So far these questions have neither found satisfactory answers nor have they even been formulated with the full incisiveness they deserve. This explains also why so many studies dealt rather with some fragments of modernism (futurism, surrealism, constructivism and so on) but not with modernism as a large movement in its own right. In short, they lacked a synthetic approach. But is synthesis possible at all? At the present state of research there is no easy answer to this question but one should undertake an effort which could allow, perhaps, the opening of new investigative avenues.

In looking for new solutions let us turn to Jose Ortega y Gasset's essay "The Dehumanization of Art" in which the author dwells on new art and literature being not understood by the mass audience of receivers. The Spanish philosopher does not ascribe this feature to any particular current or school only, but to the modernist movement as a whole, at least in its initial, precanonized stage, and this, in his view, reflected the new artistic sensibility, a disregard for a wider appeal and understanding. He points to other characteristics as well, such as irony or extreme subjectivity. All these traits are signs of the macrostructure of the movement. But what happens when we want to be more specific and get down to the level of microstructure and see whether we can find some common characteristics in concrete literary practice of various "isms"? Or to put it bluntly, are these differences between, for example, futurism or imagism totally unbridgeable? In trying to answer this question I would first like to take recourse to the material from Russian literature and then later take a shorter look at some Western examples. What I have in mind is the concept of art and literature as "thing" or "object," in Russian "věšč," which became particularly popular and practiced in poetry, but also present in other literary genres and visual arts. There is no clear-cut definition of what a thing-poem is, but its distinct mode of existence can be established by setting it apart from the romantic model of poems tinged by personal experience (German *Erlebnisgedicht*) in which the lyrical "I" opens its feelings and most often bestows them upon nature. Thus the lyrical subject tries to achieve the closest possible unity with the universe. In "thing-poetry," on the other hand, the poetic persona remains withdrawn and hidden, as it were, behind the description of things and tries to render his/hers observations of the outside world. In such poetry the visual element might be a factor in determining its "thingness."

East or West, the early adherents of "thing-poetry," united by their opposition to symbolist vagueness and search for the absolute, developed a number of strategies to achieve their artistic ends with the help of the extensive use of nouns, the development of semantic fields, the use of new

10 In "Following the Classic: Layers of Stylistic Mimesis," V. Nemoianu writes: "Classical model provides a privileged example of 'non-mimetic' mimesis" (1984b, 209).

diacritical marks, the combination of verbal expressiveness with visual effect, „destruction of the traditional stanza and so on.

In numerous critical studies literary scholars devoted considerable amount of attention to one of the most central aspects of futurist aesthetics, namely the well known slogan of the "word as such" which became one of the principal corner-stones of Russian futurism. Considering the importance this principle played in fostering further experimentation, particularly on the level of poetic lexis and in the rise and development of theoretical premises of Russian Formalism, the interest shown in this specific aspect of futurist vision is understandable. However, one should not overlook the fact that in spite of common declarations, Russian futurism displayed in literary practice a far-reaching internal diversity. Right from the beginning, it contained the seeds of the development which fostered contradictory, at times opposite artistic realizations. The poetry of V. Majakovskij is a case in point. Although the author of *Oblako v štanax* (*Cloud in Trousers*) signed all of the most important futurist manifestoes, he did not follow the extreme line of experimentation and remained rather cool towards the idea of translational language (*zauum*) advocated so strongly by A. Kručonyx and V. Xlebnikov. When reading Majakovskij's early poems, one is struck by what, in a most ordinary way, can be defined as *concreteness*. In spite of their metaphorical complexity, Majakovskij's poetry displays, so to speak, an amazingly materialized appearance. For example, the poem *Elšč Petersburg* (*It Is Still Petersburg*) contains nouns and expressions which in our everyday vernacular speech do not have physical connotations. Yet in this poem "fog" has the face of a cannibal who devours people. Of course *tuman* ("mist" or "fog") cannot have the face of a cannibal who "masticates unsavory people" but Majakovskij's poem transforms certain abstract or immaterial phenomena into an iconic homologue. Examples can be multiplied; thus the cloud can be "dressed" in trousers (as in the title of the well-known poem), the "night" is "obscene" and "drunken" and what Majakovskij calls "city's inferno" (*adišč goroda*) is described in most tangible terms by making reference to some attributes of the modern city. Majakovskij's metaphor often moves from the realm of the abstract to the realm of the concrete. The semantic content of these metaphors activates the reader's visual perception and lends to the poetic discourse an almost physical appearance. Such formal devices, aimed at achieving the illusion of thingness, are further enhanced by the clearly descriptive and narrative mode of these poems which finds its most evident manifestation in the use of the colloquial.

It should be noted that among futurists, Majakovskij was not alone in his attempts to create what can be called "thing poetry" (or "thing poem"). It was at the same time that Vasilij Kamenskij wrote a cycle of poems entitled *Železobetonnye poemny* (*Ferroconcrete Poems*). The title itself is quite indicative of the author's intentions and one can suggest that Kamenskij was consciously

striving to achieve the impossible, that is, to create a poem-object (a poem thing). A number of poems seem to confirm such a claim, e.g., "Konstatinopol" (Constantinople), "Kabare" (Cabaret), "Tsirk" (Circus), "Polet" (Flight). The latter poem, written in the shape of an isosceles triangle was to be read from the bottom up to the apex which ended with a dot symbolizing a dashed away plane in the sky. By and large these poems can be defined as syncretic poetry which combines a strong visual element with the word and reference to or even cult of technological inventions. They are supposed to be "seen" rather than read and it comes as no surprise that Kamenskij presented them as "exhibits" with Larionov's so called "no.4" group of painters in 1914.

Futurists' early literary practice makes it easier to understand why some of them embraced the revolution with an almost childish credulity by developing the aesthetic program of LEF. The idea of art as "thing" can be viewed as preceding the slogan of "žiznestroenie," i.e., "life-building" and the concept of "literatura fakta" (literature of fact) which came to occupy such prominent position in their program. As far as the "thingness" of art is concerned its interpretation within LEF acquired a twofold form: either it was understood as a dissolution of the artists' creativity in the production of things of practical use, which of course led to the rise of applied and industrial art; or it meant a preservation of an artist's (and writer's) status as a creator but whose creative drive was limited by and heavily dependent on the happenings of every day life.

However, it may come as a surprise that the futurists did not formulate explicitly the idea of poetry and literature as thing. In fact, it was accomplished by acmeists. In his early programmatic declarations, Nikolaj Gumilev, the spiritual father of Acmeism, insisted that the word cannot be a sign of or an allusion to the unknown (undetermined) but ought to possess a concrete and definite power of denotation. He suggested that a lyrical poem ought to be cast in the same mold as is the beautiful human body "this highest degree of imagined perfection" (my translation, "[stixotvorenje dolžno javljat'sja slepkom prekrasnogo čelovečeskogo tela], etoj vyššej stepeni predstavljajemogo soveršenstva," 1968a, 163). In the article "Nasledie simvolizma i akmeizm" ("The Legacy of Symbolism and Acmeism"), he formulated his well-known comparison of the poem to a cathedral whose completion requires, of course, a long lasting and meticulous elaboration. He noted that it is more difficult to build a cathedral than a tower, which is a clear allusion to the symbolist desire of isolating oneself in the proverbial "ivory tower." Gumilev did not go as far as to declare poetry or the poem to be a "thing," but he definitely prepared the ground for such a formulation (in this respect his poem "Slovo" [Word] is quite significant). The magic word we are looking for here, that is, "thing" or "object" ("věšč") and the definition of

poetry as such,"¹¹ was pronounced by Osip Mandelstam in his article "O prirode slova" ("Concerning the Nature of the Word"):

In place of a romantic, an idealist, an aristocratic dreamer about the pure symbol, about abstract aesthetics of the word, in place of symbolism, futurism and imagism, arrived a living poetry of the word-object, and its creator is not the idealist-dreamer Mozart, but the rigorous and severe artist-master Salieri, stretching his hand to the master of things and material values, to the builder and producer of the material world.¹² (1966, 301, my translation)

In no other essay, including "Utro Akmeizma" ("The Morning of Acmeism"), has Mandelstam ever formulated more clearly the concept of poetry as thing. Whether this was a response to the growing interest in the definition of art as thing in general (the article was published in 1922 when discussion about it was in full swing and lasted throughout the twenties) or whether it was the result of his own more profound considerations is difficult to say. It should be noted, however, that in his first discussion of this subject, which took place probably as early as 1913 (in "The Morning of Acmeism") Mandelstam was definitely more cautious and not as unequivocal in this formulation of poetry's thingness as he was in 1922. In his earlier years he seems to have emphasized the importance of the words' meaning which was clearly directed against transrational linguistic experiments of the futurists. Mandelstam speaks of the reality of the verbal material, of the word as such and compares it to stone. He justifies such an aesthetic program by the spirit of the Russian language itself which, according to him, is permeated with a special kind of nominalism (he talks of Russian nominalism), it is nominalistic by nature.

Mandelstam's poetic practice both confirms and interacts with quite a few of his theoretical beliefs. If analyzed from the point of view of what we call "thingness," Mandelstam's poetry emerges as the poetry of the physical almost palpable appearances and mimetic descriptions. It is particularly evident in the poem "Tarskoje Selo" written in 1912. The poem, saturated with nouns and structured on the principle of narrative discourse, gives a realistic image of the famous St. Petersburg's suburb. In a marvelous progression, each stanza of the poem reveals before the reader a different aspect of the town's life.

The acmeists were not isolated in their efforts to find an adequate formulation of poetry as thing. In 1922 I. Ehrenburg issued in Berlin two

important programmatic documents: the book *A vse taki ona vertisja! (And Yet the World Goes Round)* and together with El. Lissitzkii the journal *Leit' Gegenstand. Objekt. (Object)*. Both publications, taken as a whole, declare with unprecedented enthusiasm that all forms of artistic creativity cannot exist but as objects, that there is no art beyond the limits of things. In the book *And Yet the World Goes Round*, I. Ehrenburg announced the arrival of new art; his most extreme (and radical) statements refer to visual arts. The creative energy of painters, sculptors and architects is dissolved, as it were, in producing practical, industrial objects. Thus plastic arts in themselves cease to exist or, to put it differently, they exist in industrial production. With regard to literature, however, Ehrenburg shows more restraint and moderation. Poetry does not wither away but moves from lyricism to epos. Ehrenburg avoids using the word "poem" and instead speaks of "beautiful objects" created by poets, and of poetic "thingness," which according to him is achieved through the introduction of the epic mode, new (as he calls it *obnažennij*, naked) rhythm, economy of artistic means for the sake of reaching precision and the use of everyday vocabulary coming from what Russians call *byt* (everyday material existence). As models worthy of emulation, Ehrenburg quotes V. Majakovskij and B. Pasternak. His particular interest is attracted by Majakovskij's poem "Čelovek" ("The Man") because it renders the abstract essence or notion of man *čelovečnosť*, that is humanness, through concrete poetic imagery.

It should be noted that the futurist and acmeist understanding of poetry or art in general differed in its premises. Eventually, their creative practice would lead to quite different results: in the former case to the negation of the necessity of art or at best, to the acceptance of so called utilitarian art, "literature of facts" (Ehrenburg's ideas were close to these concepts), and in the latter case to the opening of new possibilities for poetic expression oriented towards reflection and philosophical generalization.

A detailed analysis of this problem goes beyond the limits of this paper and calls for a separate discussion. Here I would like to stress and draw our attention to the fact that various artistic currents which existed within modernism were not isolated from each other by a proverbial "Chinese Wall" or separated by irreconcilable contradictions, but they functioned in dialectical correlation on the level of microstructure. It should be also pointed out that the concept of art and literature as "thing" or "object" is not exclusively Russian. It was known in other European literatures, including Slavic ones such as Polish, Bulgarian, Czech and others. When Anglo-American imagists formulated their artistic program they included in it the principle that "poetic ideas are best expressed by rendering of concrete objects" (Ford xiii) with absolutely accurate presentation and no verbiage (Jones 16). In his early theoretical pronouncements Ezra Pound urged poets to achieve "direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective,"

11 See Martini (266-69). Relevant and valuable material on this subject can also be found in Janacek.

12 "Na mesto romantika, idealista, aristokratskogo mečtatelya o čistom simvole, ob otvlečnoj štetike slova, na mesto simbolizma, futurizma i imazinizma prišla živaja poezija slova-predmeta, i čto tvorec ne idealist-mečtatel' Mozart, a surovij i strogij remeslennik master Sal'eri, protjagivajuščij ruku masteru večej i material'nyx cennostej, stroitelju i proizvoditelju večestvennogo mira." Of course the allusion to futurists relates to their linguistic experiments which found their expression in so called poetry of "zaum."

"to paint the thing" (Jones 16) as they see it. Slavists in both England and North America have pointed out a great similarity between Ezra Pound on the one hand and Gumilev and Mandelstam on the other. In calling for the "direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective," Ezra Pound maintained that clarity and exactness or precision in poetic practice are the most important formal and moral constituents of poetry. He insisted on the "honesty of the word." Just a few years earlier, O. Mandelstam formulated almost identical tenets in "The Morning of Acmeism." In France, thing-poetry reached its peak under the pen of Francis Ponge, whose work marks an entirely new and separate epoch in the evolution of poetic discourse in that country.¹³ "Dichter der Dinge," as German critics call Ponge, brought his poems to the point of convergence with prose; hence the use of the term "poems." It comes as no surprise that Ponge was credited for the rise of the *nouveau roman* and modern experimental cinematography.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our point of departure in this article was the acceptance of the Anglo-American view which basically assumes that modernism ought to be treated as a long-lasting literary epoch composed of many artistic currents international in scope, which often seem to be perceived as opposites or distinct at best. By accepting the term in its above mentioned meaning, we tried to reevaluate the use of some categories and qualifications which may introduce to the "modernist chaos" a certain degree of order or even clarity and which eventually could help in a better understanding of the complex nature of this movement. To this purpose we have introduced the notion of the dichotomy: classicism vs. avant-garde. We have tested here one aspect of modernist poetry (the concept of "thingness") and tried to demonstrate how it cuts across various artistic currents and national borders, extenuating (mollifying) as it were the above mentioned dichotomy of the movement. In other words, while not neglecting these differences, it is necessary to dwell on and reveal their (quite often) amazing affinity attested to by the fact of their raising the same or similar aesthetic issues in spite of resorting to various artistic (formal) strategies. Indeed, one should not overlook the fact that while dichotomy means continuous bifurcation, it also implies the existence of a main axis from which the branching takes place. These are two poles of the same phenomenon, and between them operates an entire gamut of medial currents of various programmatic shades, often accepting devices and artistic stimuli from both classicist and avantgardist sources (a typical example is Russian literary constructivism). That, in turn, leads us to believe that the

centrifugal tendencies within modernism are underlain or countered by a not so easily discernible centripetal force. Or, to express it in more typical and familiar terms, it can be said that in constructing its identity, modernism constantly deconstructs itself; the process of construction is steadily accompanied by deconstruction, which makes the movement elusive to definition. In short, it escapes easy generalizations and is difficult to "pin down" as a comprehensive entity, conforming to a more regulated artistic pattern or unified style.

While preserving moderation of judgment and avoiding hasty conclusions, one may still venture the claim (assertion) that deconstructionism, as formulated by J. Derrida at first in the late sixties, is equally the consequence of both some philosophical inspirations and theoretical (aesthetic) formulations combined with artistic practices of modernism. What do we observe in modernist texts? In a most general way it can be said that in modernism, the world is perceived as being problematic, that is, while posing epistemological questions, the artist does not provide any valid answers as to how to solve or remedy them. S/he is left, so to speak, without any guidance, and is alienated from the external reality, lost in its multiplicity and lack of any unifying *Weltanschauung*. In this respect, Roman Jakobson's remarks on the metonymic nature of cubism in painting are helpful in supporting this view. He notes that in cubist painting the object is transformed into a series of synecdoches. It seems that one can extend this claim to modernism as a whole: the entire culture and artistic production of modernism is basically of a synecdochal nature, bound by the principle of *pars pro toto*. Modernism is synecdochal on both its formal and semantic levels in that it avoids or is unable to provide a holistic, comprehensive artistic vision.

We have tried to raise some issues regarding the status of modernism as a movement within literary scholarship, without any ambition to offer definite solutions, because to reach this kind of solution at this point in time is difficult, if not impossible. My intention has been to raise questions, and stimulate perhaps a further discussion of modernism because hitherto available answers to the problems it poses still remain inconclusive and ambiguous, as ambiguous and puzzling, yet still fascinating, as the movement itself.¹⁴

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13 The most important collection of his poetry was entitled *Le parti pris des choses* and published in 1942.

14 For a detailed bibliography and survey of American discussions of modernism in the first half of the nineties see Steven Helming's "Modernism Now."

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