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The Debate on Avant-Garde and Modernism—With Russian Futurism and Symbolism as an Example

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Abstract: The relation between avant-garde and modernism has always been an issue in dispute, partly because the hypothetical nature of the terms makes them hard to cover the all-encompassing artistic reality, and partly because discussion of their relation is always in a macroscopic perspective, which makes it difficult to produce detailed and concrete research results. This paper compares Russian futurism and symbolism to analyze the similarities and differences between avant-garde and modernism in terms of their ontological, artistic, and linguistic views in creation. It has, to some extent, obtained a relatively clear answer to the relation between avant-garde and modernism.

Keywords: avant-garde, modernism, futurism, symbolism

As an important cultural phenomenon in the 20th century, avant-garde is closely related to the evolution of modernism. It is sometimes seen as a synonym for modernism, but more commonly considered as the most radical school of the latter. It completely rejects mainstream art, religious, moral, social, ideological norms, and 19th-century Realism aesthetics. Avant-garde even opposes Aristotle’s artistic theories, which are foundation of the European art. It pursues freedom of art from constraints of civilization or traditional rules, and seeks to establish an entirely new art and culture. Avant-garde has taken advantage of the major turn in philosophy and science, and led the way for 20th-century modernism. It goes from Europe to the world and influences the cultural evolution of the 20th century.

An important theoretical question in avant-garde study is its difference with modernism. A thorough and extensive discussion has been made in the theoretical community, yet so far there is no consensus. The blurred boundaries among various genres of literature and art may explain why there is not a clear-cut answer. However, it is still meaningful to discuss the two terms. As Shklovsky says, “discussion of words” could be helpful (Шкловский, 1961, p. 341). Although the
emergence of the terms of avant-garde and modernism is highly contingent and they could not precisely define the complex artistic phenomena, neglect of their connotations and extensions will lead to inefficient and only descriptive discussions of 20th-century literary trends. Therefore, this paper aims to find the difference between avant-garde and modernism by comparing futurism with symbolism, which are respectively the representative school of avant-garde and modernism in Russia.

1 Introduction to the Relation Between Avant-Garde and Modernism

First, this paper will introduce the connection between avant-garde and modernism. Reading their literature on philosophy, sociology, and aesthetics, it is obvious that the two schools’ ideas have no clear principle of distinction as artistic phenomena, and that they are very closely connected in terms of artistic innovation. For example, the relation between futurism and symbolism is clarified in a series of articles by O.A. Kling (Клинг, 1996). Bobrinskaya also suggests that there are similar aesthetic principles between the turn-of-the-century avant-garde and the Decadent School, with the latter being the precursor of avant-garde, or at least the foundation for the new art of the 20th century (Бобринская, 2003). Her view comes from the research of many foreign scholars, including Harvard professor Renato Poggioli’s The Theory of the Avant-garde. She finds similar trends in the Decadent School and avant-garde in Russian literature, which share “typological commonalities”, including attention on intuition and irrationality, “the pursuit of existential experience of creation, and the quest for existential threat and new logic” (Бобринская, 2003, p. 12). Early avant-garde borrows from the Decadents the preference for “non-literature creation” and the idea of creation based on life. They also share the obsession with synesthesia and crossover creation. Their most important similarity is their pursuit for new and unprecedented art, for which “chaos, a necessity for creation has to be created” (Бобринская, 2003, p. 20).

However, according to cultural scholar V.P. Rudnev, the two are quite different, their main difference being avant-garde’s realistic meaning (Руднев, 1999). The avant-garde school “could not hide in ivory towers like the modernists and neglect whether their works are being read or not, because the essence of avant-garde aesthetics is active influence on the audience for a sensational effect. Avant-garde could not exist without such an effect” (Руднев, 1999, p. 12). A. Zverev
(А. Зверев) also considers avant-garde to be different from modernism, because “it is not a rigorous system constructed with philosophy and art, instead its boundaries and aesthetics keep changing” (Николюкин, 2001, p. 12). In addition, the “social resistance” of avant-garde also distinguishes it from modernism.

A popular view in Western literary theory is that the difference between avant-garde and modernism lies in their degree of radicalization. “Avant-garde is the peak and the ‘engine’ of modernism, and also marks the boundary of the latter” (Гирин, 2010, p. 23). In addition, avant-garde is highly nihilistic, and completely rejects traditional art, while modernism “never completely rejects tradition although it is expressed differently by artists in different countries. The anti-tradition of modernism is nothing but a tradition of literature” (Гирин, 2010, p. 19).

In the book of Avant-garde in the Twentieth Century Culture: 1900–1930s (Гирин, 2010), the author uses a single chapter to analyze the relation between avant-garde and modernism. The conclusions are as follows. First, modernism is a large cultural unity while avant-garde is a component of it. Second, the two phenomena overlap and influence each other. Third, whether a cultural phenomenon belongs to avant-garde or modernism depends on its poetic dimension.

In the Russian literature of the early 20th century, futurism and symbolism are respectively the most typical representatives of avant-garde and modernism. Although futurism is generally classified as a modernist school, its radicalization makes it a typical representative of avant-garde in Russia. Therefore, it is possible to get a glimpse of the relation between avant-garde and modernism by comparing their typical representatives. This paper does not seek to draw an overall conclusion, instead it aims to deliver a relatively clear comparison of these two concepts by comparing their representatives.

2 The Ontological View of Creation of Avant-Garde and Modernism in Russia

According to avant-garde’s philosophical origin, it focuses on existence itself and opposes any cultural modification. That means avant-garde literature should draw strength from existence and the present rather than tradition. Thus, the Russian futurists break with the past and commit themselves to building original art. In all their manifestos, the futurists stress their independence from tradition, and any of their connection with previous genres, styles, or artistic traditions is shameful. “To the readers of our first unprecedented and unexpected work. Only we can represent our time, and we speak for this era through the art of language. The past
is suffocating. Russian Academy of Sciences and Pushkin are more convoluted than hieroglyphics” (Zhang & Wang, 2015, p. 66).

However, according to the literary history, futurism is undoubtedly the successor of symbolism. In its formation and development futurism has absorbed many creation principles of symbolism (the most representative school of modernism), along with radical and even subversive changes on them. Therefore, this could be a perspective for discussion of literary origins of Russian avant-garde creation.

What avant-garde inherits from symbolism include passion with creation, innovation, inclusive artistic thinking, demolition of artistic norms (and quest for creation based on life), and the shift of artistic creation’s focus on language. What futurism draws from symbolism is not a solution to the problem posed by art, but art itself and the passion for salvation. Symbolist art aims to save a dying world and to give meaning back to life through art, which is precisely the purpose of avant-garde art. Their difference is that while solving the problems posed by art, futurism takes a different path.

The most obvious similarity between avant-garde and symbolism is their worship of creation. Both believe that art is the only option to reshape life, to restore its meaning, and to return it to its original state of being. But their paths differ. Symbolists delve into the transcendent secrets, while the futurists stay close to existence itself. Symbolists believe that art helps human to understand the meaning of existence, while futurists believe that art helps create the meaning of existence. Symbolists believe creation comes from artists’ efforts to integrate the phenomenal world and the ontological world, while futurists consider creation to be passionate embracing between the poet and the natural force. But they all agree that innovation depends on artists’ “transcendental ability” to think beyond their predecessors and contemporaries. That is why futurism claims it is not the successor of symbolism, and their new art is totally different from the previous one.

Symbolists believe that truth, God, and beauty are the foundation of all, the principles that art should follow to build the world, and the cornerstone of existence. The world of symbolist artists is a transcendental one, and they use symbolic art techniques to get into this transcendental world from the phenomenal one. As Ellis says, “new ideas only appear while we penetrate the phenomenal world, so the thought must not only come from reality, but also penetrate the reality and go through the visible and explicit reality, or the invisible and implicit reality. Phenomena are meaningful only when they offer a glimpse of truth or a reflection of the hidden ontological world. Therefore, the exploration of symbolism must go beyond the visible and sensible world of experience” (Эллис, 1998, p. 17).
However, futurists refuse to recognize the authority of transcendence, instead they hold that the process of existence has the highest ontological value. They believe that the Absolute is always present in the phenomenal world, hidden in objects and language, and externalized in human passions and actions. It is the basis for the feeling of all things, yet it is wrapped in various false conceptual shells of rational civilization, which prevents people from feeling it directly. So the road to true reality needs to be cleared of stereotypes and prejudices. In this way, truth becomes accessible. Actually it is all around us, inside things, people and language. Therefore, it is not enough to go symbolically through the visible, instead, to obtain the truth, one must go directly inside the object and extract it to the surface.

This also explains why the futurists want to completely expose things, human relationships, and their own souls, and to bring to light what is hidden, obscure, and intimate. Futurist texts, including their principles and manifestos, are full of verbs such as “destroy,” “discard,” “break,” “smash,” “cleave,” “tear,” “distort” and so on. For example, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov’s 1913 joint manifesto Declaration of the Word as Such called for futurist painters to focus on “different parts of the body and their various profiles”, and asked poets to use “disjointed words and incomplete discourse” (Zhang & Wang, 2015, p. 54).

Avant-garde art’s radical and destructive nature is also reflected in its rhetoric and vocabulary. It does not avoid using vulgar words, and often uses irregular language (particularly Kruchenykh), such as prepositionless constructions, infinitive constructions, ellipsis, and even ungrammatical sentences to break the traditional cohesive ties among sentences. It does not follow punctuation rules, and uses self-made words to express what is beyond the rationally intelligible or expressible in ordinary language. According to I.P. Smirnov, the word “zaum” (заумь) is an anagram of the word Muse (Муза). Also, Mayakovsky places the following sounds in the front position in poetic language: Эр, Ща/Ща, because they sound like animal alarm calls (growling and sibilance) (Смирнов, 1994).

Many researchers have pointed out futurists’ intention to destroy everything. “Avant-garde’s aesthetic practice reveals its unprecedented tendency to justify violence, coercion, cruelty, and destruction than any other previous literature” (Смирнов, 1994, p. 182). However, futurists hold that only through such bloody anatomy can the most real part of existence be exposed, and only through violence can the truth of this phenomenal world full of contingencies be revealed.

The world does not follow a macroscopic law, instead it serves real activities and real things in nature. Its laws come from how things exist and how things move. Therefore, avant-garde believes that truth is not macroscopic or separate from life phenomena. On the contrary, truth exists on a microscopic level of
existence, because it is exactly those microscopic things that constitute matter and phenomena in nature. The famous critic Boris Groys has a classic comment: in the era of avant-garde, “the mission of art turns from imitation of the external reality to revealing of the original thing in cultural memory, which represents pure reality that has not been identified as object or subject by civilization. Avant-garde highlights the original simplicity of things, and discovery of original things that have not degraded and have not been destroyed by civilization” (Гройс, 1990, pp. 68, 71).

This means avant-garde is committed to returning to the original state of oneness of all and finding the most universal principle of existence. Symbolists aim to reproduce the socio-empirical reality through its transcendent meaning, while futurists hope to reveal the truth of things in the accessible world of experience. According to A. Genis, futurists have “brought the craze for a simple unity, one of the central cultural ideas in Russia, to an extreme. The unity of individuals to the whole, of arithmetic to algebra, and of many to one is often seen as progress in this country, because in this way chaotic elements find their original places in the world” (Генис, 2003).

In general, futurism is metonymical, namely, presenting the whole with the part. This is because futurists believe that reality is unified in nature despite of its diverse forms. So one characteristic that is unique or even unessential of a concrete phenomenon can be interpreted as the real feature and even the truth of reality. For example, in Mayakovsky’s A Cloud in Trousers, the breakup of the main character reveals the truth that loneliness and insatiability of wishes are the basic laws for human beings and any other existence. The urban sewage system eulogized by David Burliuk in Sewers embodies a complete structure of urban life, which represents the only shared interest of the citizens.

Futurism believes that all phenomena are unified in nature, partly because of their spatiality in artistic thinking. Futurists hold that reality never changes through history, and it needs to be revealed through artistic works. They believe this idea distinguishes them from previous schools. According to their spatial artistic thinking, the world is a whole, in which all phenomena share a common property. Events of different eras are homogeneous and connected in meaning. The nature of human relationships never changes, and nor do the causes of contradictions in life. Therefore, in futurist works, events from different eras can be put together or even substituted for one another.

The artistic philosophy of measuring time-related phenomena with spatiality may sound obscure to the public. However, this “new spatial feature” of futurism (Бахтин, 1997, p. 56) stems exactly from futurists’ pursuit of the common “root” of the whole world, as is mentioned in the last paragraph. This philosophy is very similar with one saying of Chinese philosopher Lao Zi: “Dao gives birth to one, one
to two, two to three, and three to all things”. Futurism believes that there is such a “Dao” in the world. Therefore, its goal is to see the unchanged in change, and to describe the changing phenomena with rational language, vocabulary, mathematical formulas and numbers.

3 The Art View of Russian Modernism and Avant-Garde

Both symbolists and futurists believe that the task of artistic activity is to change the fundamental laws of things. That is why their creations go beyond the traditional boundaries of art. As innovators of a new era, they not only create literary texts and artistic pictures, but also new reality to replace or reflect the entire human world.

The world is a whole, thus human activities should be comprehensive rather than limited to specific fields or disciplines. However, this may deprive art of its autonomy. Modernism is the first school that does not value artistic autonomy, because the latter means extraction of art from the interconnected human activity as a whole and recognition of art as an independent field. Paradoxically, it was not until the 18th century that art, which had struggled for centuries for independence from religious and practical needs of society, began to guide consumers’ life instead of catering to their wishes and tastes. Yet at the end of the 19th century, art turned to elimination of the boundaries between creation and life.

Modernists believe that only they could define beauty and meaning, and they want to give a broader meaning to ordinary life. Symbolists hold that the mission of artistic creation is to elevate the phenomenal world by extending the laws of art to everyday life. The younger generation of symbolists want to revive everyday reality by recreating it. As Hansen-Löve writes, “Symbolism makes an artist a creator of life. He turns non-existence into existence, quietness into sound, silence into discourse, chaos into order, and insufficiency into excess. He resurrects the dead with his own language, for he himself is a word that creates, a verb. With his help, the ‘unspoken words’ have a ‘voice’. As a real man, he is both the creator and the created, both the original and the reproduction. He ‘renews’ the principles of creation” (Хансен-Леве, 1998, pp. 70–72).

Modernism adopts a completely different value system, with the primary criterion being things’ relation with art. According to symbolism, creation based on life means art’s expansion into everyday life and the replacement of everyday principles with aesthetic principles. Although futurism is influenced by symbolist artistic practice, it adopts a different path in creation based on life. Futurism seeks
life’s expansion into art rather than art’s expansion into life. Avant-garde holds that the modernist blueprint of “artisticization of life” only reinforces the artificiality and hypothetical nature of human existence, which pulls people away from the real life. In this way, art becomes a force of alienation. Avant-garde realizes this, so it insists on a focus on life while recognizing the value of artistic creation. The task of art is to present life in its truest, unadorned form, for which all barriers must be removed, including conventional principles and concepts, and cultural forms that inhibit the vigour of life.

Avant-garde believes that the meaning of existence can not exist without the thing itself. Kruchenyk writes, “We do not need intermediaries like symbols and ideas. We create new truths, rather than reflect the light of the sun (or copy a big tree). Symbolism holds that any creator is limited, therefore it is hard to convey the real truth” (Крученых, 1999, p. 51). However, futurism holds that meaning is inseparable from the materiality of the world, and it arises from contact between man and object. It suggests that things and phenomena have been artificially given some additional meaning in the process of cultural development, thus distorting their nature. Therefore, the task of art is to restore the original meaning of all things in the world and to eliminate the system of false concepts that distorts their nature. For this purpose, objects must be extracted from their familiar cultural contexts.

This means that futurism resolutely fights against traditional culture. Symbolists wish to create a new world by exploring the noble mission of the world, while futurists aim to remove and destroy everything that distorts the nature of life. This includes elimination of thought patterns, daily norms, religious concepts, moral codes, behavioral statutes, and anything stubborn or conservative in human existence. They hold that artists’ works should take off the camouflage of tradition to reveal the real truth and meaning of existence.

Thus, the whole world needs to be involved in artistic creation so that art and life could interact with each other. That explains why for avant-garde artists, creating works in traditional artistic forms such as poetry, fiction, and painting is not enough. He has to turn his every work and act into a tool that could transform the extratextual reality for that is his responsibility as an artist.

Classical art focuses on the impact of works on life, and even its most introspective work such as a diary or a confession has potential audience, and it is obvious that the author tries to construct a relationship with his audience in a particular way. In modern linguistic terms, this shows the pragmatic level of the work, which is as important as its semantic and syntactic levels. Yet in futurist works the pragmatic dimension is dominant, and this phenomenon has received lots of attention in recent decades. M.I. Shapir in his famous essay “The Aesthetic Experience of the Twentieth Century: the avant-garde and postmodernism” has a classic statement: “In avant-garde art the pragmatic effect comes first, and the
impact of art is crucial. It has to shock, alert, excite, disturb, and provoke a positive reaction. And this effect must be rapid, without a lasting and concentrated experience of aesthetic forms and content. It is necessary to make this reaction happen immediately and to solidify it before it is deeply understood, in order to let such reaction influence the deeper understanding of it, and to make the understanding as difficult as possible” (Шапир, 1995, p. 136).

Futurists aspire to reconstruct the oneness of existence. Their blueprint for creation based on life contains several plans, and each requires bridging the gap between material and symbolic reality. It is objecthood, the language of artistic creation, and the subjective will of the artist that dominate the interplay between the artist, the world of objects, and the language.

4 The Linguistic View of Russian Modernism and Avant-Garde

The most obvious evidence of the inheritance relationship between symbolism and futurism is their shared interest of the linguistic dimension in artistic creation. For symbolism, the most urgent issue is to create new language and new artistic forms, because expression of the Absolute and the transcendence requires breaking free from the traditional thinking and art, namely, to get rid of the control of the existing language. This means each new step requires will power, imagination, intuition, and new forms of expression of new feelings. Therefore, the symbolists consciously set themselves the task of “talking about the unprecedented with unprecedented language” (Гинзбург, 1974, p. 248).

Symbolists believe that language is the only accessible source to know the “eternal thing” and the only way to reach for it. Moreover, in their perception, everything in the world is just a form of the highest meaning, while language is the essence deep in the transcendental world. Therefore, symbolists endow both the textual and extratextual reality with language properties.

Symbolists’ creation is a conscious expansion of the potential meaning of words, and their understanding of creation based on life is to extend the rules of language to real life. Symbolists have a clear understanding of the linguistic property of their creation activity. They focus on linguistic exploration and introduce the latest linguistic ideas into their works.

The second half of the 19th century saw a sudden increase in popular interest in language, especially in Russia, and language-centrism was the most distinctive feature of philosophical and artistic thinking in that period. The invisible potential of language was discovered, such as its ability to remember all the precious
information in cultural subconsciousness and to carry the essence of mythological ideas. In this sense, language not only contains certain knowledge about reality, it also preserves truth, which is embedded in condensed versions of the phenomenal world, myths, making the truth easier to understand for the public (Вагнер, 1909).

Symbolists are well aware of this notion. They are committed to extracting mythological elements from words, and combining some philosophical symbols according to the structure of a certain complex to form a text with symbolic meaning and mythological structure. In Bely’s Petersburg, for example, the Russian classics (by Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, etc.) are the mythical elements that make up the text, intertwined to convey a universal meaning, and eventually developed into the formula of “Russian destiny” (the destiny of man and country).

The purpose of symbolism’s transformation of language is to “go from the real to the most real”. In other words, symbolism requires language to have symbolic meaning in addition to its substantive meaning, and if this meaning could be conveyed in the transcendental world, then the truth of this phenomenal world could be revealed. The artist cares not about syntax, grammar, or rhetoric in his creation, but words. Words have special importance in the text, as Blok’s says, “A poem is nothing but a cover on the light of words. The words shine like stars. Poems live because of the words. The darker one poem is, the farther the words are from the text” (Блок, 1965, p. 84).

If a word is far away from the text, its meaning will be less concrete and it will be less dependent on the referent. “Then the word conveys only metaphysical meaning, and becomes extremely abstract and idealistic.” (Гриц, 2000, p. 231)

For symbolists, removal of the objectivity or substantive of words is necessary, but for futurists this is totally unacceptable. Although futurism also advocates autonomy of words, their autonomy is different from that of symbolism. Futurism highlights “autonomous words” full of material substance that destroys anything illusory in language, so as to provide an explosion of concrete meaning. It also suggests that autonomous words are a source of energy and an engine of dynamic development of the text, rather than reflections of constant truths and values. Avant-garde believes that the independence of certain language elements from substance would deepen the separation between symbolic and physical reality. Therefore, futurists aspires to end the alienation of language.

5 Concluding Remarks

From a macro perspective, there is not a universal standard to identify the relations between avant-garde and modernism. Some criteria are based on inclusion or cross
relations, some by their degree of radicality, some by their degree of opposition against tradition, and others by their distance from reality. From a comparison of the two representative schools of avant-garde and modernism in Russia, we draw some more specific and clear conclusions. In terms of the ontology of creation, symbolism believes that the purpose of creation is to reveal the truth of existence through the transcendental world, while futurism believes that the truth of existence lies in the empirical and material world, and the ontology could only be revealed through bloody anatomy. In terms of artistic views, symbolism believes that the mission of art is to enhance the phenomenal world, which means expansion of art into life, while futurism believes that art is to show the most authentic life without decoration of civilization, which means expansion of life into art and restoration of the original meaning of everything in the world through art. In terms of language, symbolism gives language symbolic meaning, and reveals the truth of the phenomenal world by conveying the meaning in the transcendental world through symbols, while futurism is devoted to restoring the material meaning of language and removing the cultural meaning attached to it, so as to reveal the truth of things.

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