

II. RECENZJE

JEL ÉS KIÁLTÁS (SIGN AND CRY).
Essays by Miklós Szabolcsi, Budapest,
Gondolat, 1971.

There are two studies in this volume, *The Avant-garde in Art and Literature as an International Current* and *Problems of the Neo-avant-garde*, as well as a shorter piece, *Open Questions*, summing them up. In Mr. Szabolcsi's opinion the avant-garde movement took place by and large between 1905 and 1938. A literary movement might be defined, or might define itself, on three levels, of which the aesthetic one is the highest. As a rule, the number of the aesthetic features characterizing a movement is rather low. The middle level consists of sociological and historical characteristics; while the lowest contains elements belonging to the linguistic and literary code which may be described summarily as morphological. It is, however, not a matter of mere chance which characteristics of an artistic movement — the aesthetic, socio-historical, or the morphological — become most prominent. In the avant-garde movements either their socio-historical features are emphatic, as e.g. in the movement called "proletarian literature", or their morphological characteristics, as e.g. in the "aestheticist" trends of the avant-garde. The "catastrophism", a trend succeeding the avant-garde in Eastern Europe, was defined primarily by its aesthetic features. It is worth remembering that the three levels together as a whole

will characterize an artistic trend. Once a trend has come into existence, and Szabolcsi also emphasizes this, those that come later may easily adopt elements from one or another level of its characteristics (mostly those of the morphological level). This explains why it is so difficult, e.g., to draw a dividing line between the avant-garde and the trends that came later, since almost all successive trends adopted its metaphoric structures. It is therefore understandable why literary scholarship was engaged for such a long time in the task of defining the boundaries of the avant-garde art, or, to put it bluntly, in writing its history. This work, however, is far from being completed. (The situation well illustrated by the fact that an accurate history of the Russian futurism has been only recently published by V. Markov.) Nor is it an easy job, in the case of the avant-garde, to outline the boundaries of the movement. First, the very concept of the avant-garde had to be freed from the false ideological attributes it had been encrusted with, and it had to be reclaimed through a historical approach. Szabolcsi does this work consistently so far as the avant-garde is concerned, but when he sets up the framework for the historical approach, historicism is displaced by an evaluative-typological aspect, according to which the avant-garde is positioned in an area between realistic art and pseudo-art. In my opinion this re-

sults in a comparison of incommensurable phenomena, as in this interpretation the avant-garde art is a historical movement, while realism is not, to say nothing of pseudo-art.

In outlining the historical position of avant-garde art Miklós Szabolcsi's achievements are definitive, even on an international scale. The report to the 1967 Belgrade Congress of the Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée, an extended version of which is printed in the reviewed volume, sums up the results of more than ten years research and indicates a sort of victory in a prolonged struggle for a situation which is favourable enough for this kind of research.

Szabolcsi, as a matter of fact, has made a complete international survey of the avant-garde art. We may take a special delight in his enormous range of information and in the fact that the trends of the "small" literatures of Eastern Europe, and among them the trends of Hungarian literature, are for the first time duly dealt with. There is only one gross mistake worth mentioning. It appears to be a one-sided statement that "all along, avant-garde art played a purely subordinate role, it was but an episode" in Soviet Russian literature. The Russian avant-garde was not only the most important trend in Eastern Europe, but so far as its artistic achievements are concerned — it is sufficient to recall the names of Mayakovsky, Essenin and Pasternak — it was probably the most prolific literature in the whole movement.

Szabolcsi describes the avant-garde first and foremost in sociological and historical terms. "The most general common feature of avant-garde art, and the fundamental cause of its existence has a sociological character; its point of departure was a feeling of crisis due to a change in the function of the arts and of literature, and various attempts were made to overcome the crisis thro-

ugh a radical rejuvenation of the art or of society". This approach, based on the idea of functional change, is well suited to the detection of the internal antinomies of the avant-garde art, which were the source of its tensions and which acted as its motive force: the contrast between the mass art of the day and the mass art of the future, the tension between the immediate cultural tasks and a high-brow literature, the contradictions between a constructive sobriety and the passions of the subconscious, the conflict between commitment and art for art's sake, etc. It seems to me that as a next step the description of aesthetic characteristics should follow, revealing what elements are common in the various avant-garde groups engaged in combat and debate with each other, and what makes them different from other — post-symbolistic, neorealistic, *narodnik*, etc. — trends.

Though the avant-garde movement came to an end about 1935 (or, in my opinion, even earlier, about 1930), it still resists attempts to put it into a historical perspective and to consider it as a closed entity. But if it is so, what can we say about the neo-avant-garde which emerged after 1945 and which, as a matter of fact, established itself as an artistic trend, only after 1960? As to the technical term: the literary historian may classify works and groups of writers and describe the unities so obtained with a perfectly new term. I think that this should be done in the case of the „neo-avant-garde” as well and especially so because there is no direct lineage or immediate continuity between the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, as it comes clear precisely in terms of the point of view chosen by Mr. Szabolcsi. What happened in fact was that art became functionless so thoroughly in the 20th century that by the time the neo-avant-garde appeared, the society had defunctioned the spiritual protest and the revolution-

nary outcry of the avant-garde. How well Szabolcsi puts it: „Rebellion or quasi-rebellion is no longer a deed of valiance and of challenge, but an obligatory ceremony; nor is the new movement starting an exalted and enthusiastic enterprise, but a well advertised daily event. In the years between 1949 and 1960 the avant-garde became part of the capitalist establishment; what once shocked the bourgeois became an obligatory activity for almost any bourgeois, or at least a harmless spectacle, an inalienable part of the neo-capitalist system”. This, however, means that the true successors of the avant-garde, the representatives of a neo-avant-garde, are not those artists who play the clown and scream even more frantically than their predecessors, but the “artists of silence”, the artists whose warning about the threats the artist — and with him man — is exposed to in modern society arises from the harsh, or at times distorted signals of silence. Thus it is they who draw the conclusions from the functional change of the arts as consistently as their avant-gardist precursors. The only trouble is that, as a rule, their work has to be measured by morphological values radically different from those of the avant-garde, based on symbolistic and catastrophistic traditions diametrically opposed to the aspirations of avant-garde art.

Of all the disputable questions, I should like to pick one only, one which I deem to be most important. Mr. Szabolcsi holds that ca. 1935 “having sown the wild oats of the avant-garde the artists converted to a more harmonious and constructive art”, and assumed the synthesis of „a complex, indirect, intellectual realism which appeared at the beginning of the 20th century”, and which came to include certain achievements of the avant-garde as well. But that “synthesis” had no firm foundation, as the rapprochement “between the literature and the public, between art and

the masses” has, in many areas of the world, not been accomplished even today. “The history of avant-garde is unclosed, a chapter with no conclusion”. As I see it, so far as solved and unsolved problems are concerned, all artistic trends remain unfinished, since, and this is a commonplace, it is not their task to solve problems. Nor do I believe that the type of synthesis mentioned by Szabolcsi does exist. A valuable work of art can, at the most, synthesize the problems of its own age, but not those which the preceding trend was confronted with! The avant-garde movement found its synthesizers in the artists of the avant-garde: Mayakovsky, Aragon, Attila József, Kassák, Nezval, Przyboś and others. The other trends which replaced the avant-garde in the 30ties reached a synthesis within their own framework: in the works by Bulgakov, C. Miłosz, Attila József, Holan and others.

Almost every page of this small book is thought-provoking and a challenge for further discussion. We are all aware of the impetus which the Belgrade address gave to the study of the avant-garde everywhere. Miklós Szabolcsi's book, with its wide horizons, remains one of the examples of the scholarly approach to literature in Hungary in the recent decades.

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Colin Watson, SNOBBERY WITH VIOLENCE. London 1971, ss. 256.

Zadaniem, jakie stawia sobie Watson w książce *Snobizm i przemoc*, jest odpowiedź na dwa zasadnicze pytania: jak ukształtował się i rozwijał gatunek powieści kryminalnej i jakie były przyczyny jego popularności.

Obecnie, kiedy wielu pisarzy i krytyków o ustalonej renomie zajęło się tak zwanymi „kryminałami”, a na niektórych zachodnich uniwersytetach modne stało się poświęcanie im całych cyklów