

# The Avant-garde and Perception.

## Towards a New Theory

Silvio Vietta

### I. The Revolution of Rationality

There have been a significant number of publications to the subject of the avant-garde, many of them published in the 70<sup>th</sup> of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the following, we will try a new approach but will quote some of the most important theories on the subject.

I will begin with three distinctions, namely (A) the horizon of literary perception as a means of understanding the world and communication within the *macro-epoch* of the occidental tradition of literature, (B) the level of perception in the *micro-epoch* of a certain time in a certain national language – especially around 1900 and (C) the perception of an individual *author* within a certain language within this micro-epoch of a certain time.

I will start with the level (A) perception of literature as a means of understanding the world and communication within the occidental tradition of literature. The addition “within the occidental tradition of literature” is important because I am sure that Japanese or Chinese or Indian literatures have notably different traditions in contrast to the European-occidental tradition of literature.

The *European-occidental* tradition of *literature* entered a new age in the moment when philosophy and science came into being. This was the case in the 8<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century before Christ and took place in ancient Greece. In the historical moment when philosophy-science – which had been one and the same at their beginning – came to fruition, literature too entered a new age of post-mythical-enlightenment. I call this historical moment of mankind the “revolution of rationality” and refer here to my book on History of Rationality and the following book on Literature and

Rationality. This new age is characterized by the attempt to understand the world merely by rational means and not by mythological Gods or one God. Pre-Socratic philosophy-science explained the cosmos and its Beings by one substance like water (Thales), Air (Anaximenes), Fire (Heraclitus), Atoms (Democritus), as I can show in this graphic:

<b><i>Thales of Miletus</i></b> about 625 BC – 547 BC	<b><i>Anaximander</i></b> about 610 BC – 546 BC	<b><i>Anaximenes</i></b> about 585 BC – 526 BC	<b><i>Heraklitus</i></b> about 550 BC – 480 BC	<b><i>Parmenides</i></b> about 515 BC – 450 BC	<b><i>Empedokles</i></b> about 485 BC – 435 BC	<b><i>Demokritus</i></b> about 460 BC – 370 BC
WATER	UNLIMITED	AIR	FIRE	BEING	FOUR ELEMENTS	A-TOM

The world in this concept is subsequently no longer an outcome of the will of Gods or one God but is explained by material principles which the Greeks regarded as eternal. Later Plato would add the concept of the “idea” as the structuring force of the Universe.

*Rationality* in this sense means the ability of the human brain to regard things in a logic of causality and to explain things as materializations of abstract principles which define the basic substances of the world. This invention led to modern science which of course corrected the basic ideas of the Greek philosophy-science. For example, the notion of “Atom” which was meant to be something indivisible, has been proved in modern Physics to be *divisible*, which then led to the invention of the atom bomb. The basic idea however, that the Universe is built up by *elementary kernels* of material since then has guided human research. The revolution of rationality thus marks the entrance into a world of science and scientific understanding of the world and thus an age of rationality.

Before I come to the role and perception of literature in this world, I would like to make some further steps. Firstly, I have to note that among the candidates for the understanding of the world

one candidate is of particular importance: the concept of *number*.<sup>1</sup> It was the Pythagoreans – a philosophical school in the Greek colony of Southern Italy – who regarded number as their most important instrument in understanding the cosmos. As Philolaos, a Pythagorean who lived at the time of Socrates, put it in words: “For the nature of number is helpful in the understanding of things and it is guiding in all things which are doubtful or unknown.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, Greek mathematics were still simple. At the beginning, Pythagoreans believed that the cosmos could be understood in simple natural figures. They had just discovered the *irrational* figures. Furthermore; the number ‘0’ was not known to the Greek. This number was an Indian invention and came to Europe via Arabic culture not before the 9<sup>th</sup> century after Christ.

However: The idea that the cosmos can be understood rationally in *quantifiable mathematical proportions* was already a Greek, namely Pythagorean invention. The modern approach of science, as formulated by Galileo, is based on this understanding. According to Galileo, nature is constructed in the “speech of mathematics”<sup>3</sup> and it is therefore this discipline that holds the key to the understanding of the universe. Shortly after Galilei, the German philosopher Leibniz invented a binary code, which expresses all numbers by two numbers: namely 0 and 1 – which forms the basis for modern computer languages. Leibniz also invented a machine that could carry out arithmetical operations which became the precursor of the modern computer. Men like Leibniz, Hobbes and Galileo were modern Neo-Pythagoreans. With their inventions, we stand at the beginning of modern science and the Digital Age, our own age of calculation in science as well as in economics. Let us first however, go back for a moment to the age of the revolution of science in ancient Greece. It was also the time when men began to rationalize *time* and *space* by mathematizing time and by dividing space in geometrical patterns. In this respect, the Greeks were already the heirs of former cultures like the Babylonian and the Egyptian culture. Following them, the Greek and then the

---

<sup>1</sup> For the following see Silvio Vietta, *Rationalität. A World History*, München 2012, 69ff („Rationality and Number“)

<sup>2</sup> *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. ed. by Hermann Diels, Hamburg 1957, 78, Fragment 11, translated by S.V.

<sup>3</sup> Galileo Galilei, *Siderius Nuntius*, ed. by Hans Blumenberg, Frankfurt a. M. 2002, 157.

Romans built cities and military camps in sheer geometrically rectangular patterns, which became the main inspiration of Le Corbusier, the chief architect of the megalopolis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There was in addition the invention of another instrument of quantification of things: The invention of *coin-money* in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This invention transformed human culture fundamentally into a marketplace trades and services and brought also the separation of classes into rich and poor.

Allow me to conclude this brief stroll through the revolution of rationality with a short glance at its *military* application. Here, we see that the rational organization of armies into the geometrical blocks of the Phalanx was the basis for the victories of the Greeks and Macedonians under Alexander the Great over the Persians. This became the foundation of the Roman Empire for at least 6 centuries. In modern times, fire weapons were the instrument by what the little European continent as well as the US and also Japan conquered the world and led to the development of globalization, with which we currently share existence.

I would also like to note that this superiority of rational means of weapons, money, science and technology was always accompanied, or even driven forwards by an *irrational* greed for money, gold, luxury, political superiority. Thus, the age of rationality was constantly linked with the irrational and this irrationality in combination with rationality remains prevalent in our present days.

## **II. Literature in the Age of Rationality**

Now what has literature to do with the age of rationality? How does literature react to it? How does literature *perceive* it? We have, indeed, a deep break between the *mythical* age of Homer and the *rational* age of the Greek tragedy and theatre. Indeed, the horizon of literature changed fundamentally within the new age of rationality. In short: With the beginning of the age of rationality, *literature* also entered a new age of rationality.<sup>4</sup> The switch from myth to tragedy as it took place by the invention of *theatre*, already meant a *rationalization* of myth. In theatre, the myth

---

<sup>4</sup> Fort he following see also Silvio Vietta, *Literatur und Rationalität*, München 2014.

is transformed into a spectacle and presented to an audience. According to, Aristotle tragedy should have an effect of catharsis on the spectator. Nevertheless already the *form* of theatre is a form of secularization of myth. The *story* of myth too, is transformed into the form of a *dramatic plot* which is now newly arranged by the playwright according to the logic of dramatic effects. Once again, Aristotle tells us that the playwright of a tragedy is not allowed to change the substance of myth. But he himself names rules by which the dramatist can arrange the plot in a dramatic way. Aristotle in his *Poetics*, thus marks the transformation from myth to drama in theatre. He says that the tragedy should follow myth in its basic topics, but then he says also that the drama arranges the plot in a new way according to the rules of drama.<sup>5</sup> In this way, already the *form* of theatre and drama offer new forms of the rationalization of myth.

In our discussion so far, we have spoken of the form of theatre and drama. We can add now, that the *content* of the myth also changed in tragedy. The first generation of tragedians such as Aeschylus in his *Oresteia*-trilogy transform the bloody tragic end into a trial in which the gods Athene and Apollo guarantee a *rational* solution to bloody conflicts.

But the *next generation* of tragedians: Sophocles and Euripides – offer a new kind of solution within drama. In their tragedies “*Antigone*” or “*Medea*,” it is not the rational part that wins but the *woman* as representative of the *criticism* of rationality. Antigone as well as Medea criticize the narrowness and narrowmindedness of rationality as represented in the male figure of Kreon in “*Antigone*” and Jason and Kreon in “*Medea*”. The female heroines are much stronger in mind than the masculine figures, it is their criticism of rationality that is stronger as rationality itself.

This particular propensity of the antique drama has opened up the horizon for hundreds of years of European and even global literature up to the advent of the modern novel. Through the long history of rational civilization, the development of literature has become one of the most important tools of criticizing the narrowness and one-sidedness of the culture of rationality. In the middle ages, a text like Dante’s “*Divina Commedia*” achieves this aim in criticizing the church and its greed of money

---

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle uses fort hat the term „systasis“, see his 1450a.

as a betrayal to the ideas of Jesus Christ. In early modern times, dramas like Shakespeare's "Hamlet" show that not only the court of Denmark but also the age of modernity as an age is "out of joint" which Hamlet perceives, but cannot repair.<sup>6</sup> One of the first modern novels like Goethe's "*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*" (*The Sorrows of young Werther*) criticize not only traditional feudal society, but also the new bourgeois age as an age in which an emotional sensual being like Werther can no longer feel at home. And that is the same experience in Flaubert's "*Madame Bovary*" in which the female heroine can be called a female Werther. She also feels alienated in the bourgeois atmosphere of a little French village. She lacks a feeling of life and love, her adventures with men all fail and both Werther and Madame Bovary ultimately commit suicide.

That leads us to one of the main *defects* of the civilization of rationality: its lack of *emotion* and *sensuality*. The Greek concept of defining rationality as a means of discovering the truth underlined the fact, that the rational approach to reality has nothing to do with sensuality and nothing to do with emotion. Rationality is a means of *reckoning* things in which emotion and sensuality have no place. But a society based on that principle lacks love and empathy. And that is the reason why so many heroes of literature, already in the classical drama but more so in the modern novel feel alienated by that society and even sometimes violently ending their struggle within by committing suicide.

I conclude this chapter by referring to one of the greatest novelist of modernity, Franz Kafka. His novels concentrate on another aspect of alienation, namely that the age of rationality has produced a totally irrational form of totalitarian power and politics. Kafka in his novel "Der Proceß" (The Trial) refers directly to Socialism-Communism. In one of the Paralipomena to the "Trial" the narrator writes, that Josef K. came into a "socialistic gathering," which Kafka later replaced by "political gathering."<sup>7</sup> As Franz K. notices in this chapter, all of the men in this gathering wear the same political insignia. They all are members of the same party. But this holds also for the Nazi

---

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 4.

<sup>7</sup> Franz Kafka, Der Proceß, Originalfassung, Frankfurt a. M. 1990, 48.

party. It was founded later, but shows the same totalitarian structure as the Socialist or Communist party.

The structure of the novel is strange: Josef K. is evidently accused and persecuted by a political power whose representatives he never sees. He is killed at the end without ever knowing why and what might be his guilt. But this totally opaque structure of the whole novel – has been the *real* experience of millions and millions of Russian victims, in particular under Stalin and its system of Terror. Stalin, more so than Hitler, eradicated millions of lives in order to further his system regime by the use of terror. Kafka anticipated that structure in his novel “Der Proceß”. This leads us directly to the structure of the avant-garde around 1900, the perception of the micro-epoch as well as the individual perception of authors in that time.

### **III. The concept of perception and its use in literature – an intermediate reflection**

Before I move on I would like to give a brief moment to the concept of *perception*. Perception is a term in the context of the modern concept of subjectivity. In terms of this philosophy, it is not the ontology of reality as such, but the *perception* of reality through the human mind that becomes crucial. Descartes “ego” – “I think and therefore I am” - is the turning point from classical cosmology and Christian theology to the modern concept of the Ego as the centre of the world-perception. The bishop and modern philosopher George Berkeley identifies the being of reality with its perception (“esse est percipi”).<sup>8</sup> Therefore the object and its being become a function of its perception in the subjectivity. The German Idealism of Fichte and Hegel followed that trail. Fichte saw in the activity of human knowledge, the principle of creating reality namely *within* the human mind and Hegel in his “Philosophy of Phenomenology” constructed on that principle of subjectivity the world as a construction of the human mind and within it. Husserl and after him Merleau-Ponty constructed on that basis a kind of phenomenology as a technique of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Georges Berkeley, Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Principles § 1ff.

inner perception of the being. The notion of reality transforms into an inner-subjective construction of the human mind.

This concept also had consequences for the theory of *literature*, insofar as Russian Formalism regarded literature as a process of the *alienation* (“Verfremdung”) in contrast to the normal, but automatized form of perception. One of the heads of Russian Formalists Victor Sklovsky, defined literary quality by the ability to create aesthetic qualities of *difference* (“Differenzqualitäten”) in respect to the normal automatized perception of reality. His follower Tynjanov defined the literary progress by the aesthetic difference of a new text in relation to a former ones. Brecht too, used this concept to define his political use of the “Verfremdungseffekt”. The whole concept of Russian formalism and even Brecht’s concept is based on this concept of the automatization of perception and its need to break open the automatized perception in order to perceive reality in a new mode. It is like an old marriage in which the partners after years of marriage cease to perceive each other. “Automation swallows the things”, says Sklovsky, “that way life disappears and transforms into nothing.”<sup>9</sup> Literature, in this concept of the automatization of perception, has the function of allowing reality to be seen in a new way through a new esthetic arrangement (“alienation”) and thus making it once more *perceivable*. Russian formalism as the Aesthetics of Reception of literature are basically concepts of perception. Let us now come to our main point, the:

#### **IV. Theory of the Avant-garde**

We regard the literature and art of painting in the years before and after 1900 as the age of the *avant-garde*. It is generally known, that the term derives from the language of military denoting a battle unit fighting on the frontlines. In the aesthetic context, this frontline units would be the pioneers of innovation in art and literature. In literature, we regard Rimbaud, Mallarmé, the Expressionists, among them Kafka, the Dadaists and Surrealists as such pioneers. In painting it is Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism, Surrealism, which are regarded as “avant-garde.” In painting,

---

<sup>9</sup> I quote according to the edition of „Texte der russischen Formalisten“, ed. By Jurij Striedter, München 1969, 15.



this mainly implies a style which frees itself from the program of imitating nature (“mimesis”) in favour of an object-less, abstract form of painting.<sup>10</sup> Klaus von Beyme in his thick volume on the avant-garde, denies a kind of “Generation-Theory” of the avant-garde. He identifies nevertheless the period of the avant-garde with the years of 1905 up until 1955.

In addition to von Beyme one can note, that the theory of modernity had already begun with Romanticism and in an enforced way, shortly before 1900. That propensity fosters a style which is characterized by a certain *self-reference* of art and literature, presenting the *material* of language – the *letters* in their sound and visual forms - in literature and the material of *colour* and *form* in art. This aspect prevails in the former and very influential “*Theory of the Avant-garde*” by Peter Bürger written in 1974. In it, Bürger traces the roots of the avant-garde back to the theory of autonomy of art and literature as it has been developed by Kant and Schiller as a bourgeois category. According to Bürger, the avant-garde destroys that kind of autonomy. It destroys the autonomy of the artwork, fostering new styles in art and is characterized as a non-bourgeois engagement of art.<sup>11</sup> Peter Fährnders in his book “*Avant-garde and Modernism*”<sup>12</sup> follows a similar track.

In the following new approach to the avant-garde, I am rather more inclined to follow Prof. Yamaguchi in his advice to regard the avant-garde within a long term context of European culture and literature. Bearing this in mind, I will stress other aspects of the avant-garde, mainly the aspect of *criticism*, not only of the bourgeois society, but of *modern rational civilization* as such.

I would like to pose a question: Why is it that we have such a strong push towards modernity in the age before and after 1900? It is the period in which the age of rationality in the form of a scientific, technical industrial civilization comes to a first and even threatening *climax*. At the same time this climax of the rational society is linked with a political *irrationality* because the politics of that time used industrial potentiality to build up military forces with the power of destruction and annihilation that had been previously unimaginable. We are in the age of *Imperialism* as a climax to modern

---

<sup>10</sup> Klaus von Beyme: *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden*, München 2005, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Frankfurt a.M. 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Fährnders, *Avantgarde und Moderne, 1890-1933*, Stuttgart 1998.

industrial development, colonialism and the fighting of the Great Powers for a kind of *world* power. In this situation, the avant-garde offers us its own response to the Age of Imperialism. As I mentioned earlier: We distinguished between three levels of literary perception: (A) the *macro-epoch* of European literature as a whole since ancient Greek tragedy, (B) the *micro-epoch* of a short time period as the period before and after 1900 and (C) the *individual* artists and authors within (B). For the first level of literary perception (A) we claimed, that literature since the revolution of rationality has been standing defiantly in a *critical* attitude to the development of a one-sided rationality since the days of the classical tragedy. We can now conclude, that the *micro-epoch* of the avant-garde in literature (B) does not only follow the bias of criticism, but *radicalizes* the criticism of rationality in the form of the modern rational civilization including its irrationalities in power politics. In the literary avant-garde, in particular since the days of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, we have had a fascination with , but also a strong *criticism* of the *modern civilization* as such, and that criticism grew proportionally to the growth of irrational politics in a time which, indeed, led towards a Great War, which finally came and became the first World War of humanity.

## **V. Criticism of the industrial civilization and rationality in the literary avant-garde**

### **– the level of *content***

I would now like to illustrate the theory of the enforced literary criticism of industrial civilization and rationality with some examples. The aforementioned Arthur Rimbaud, who was born in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in 1854 and died early in 1891, was alongside with Charles Baudelaire, one of the most important and influential authors of the literary avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century - namely the Expressionists. One can say that the style of writing in the German literature of that period changed substantially with the publication of his poetry in the translation of Karl Ammer. His translation of Rimbaud appeared in 1907. What, however, was new and what was *avant-garde* of that literature in respect to the tradition of literature and its general tendency of criticism?

The structure that could be considered to be *avant-garde* and *new* in Rimbaud's poetic works was the manner in which the industrial civilization was dealt with. In the former tradition of literature mainly *persons* as the representatives of rational society were criticized. These individuals were, in classic drama, mainly men as the rulers of *cities* (the *poleis*); and in Dantes "*Divina Commedia*" male representatives of the *church* such as bishops and popes; and in European Naturalism the male representatives of *industry* as the figure of the factory owner Dreißiger in Gerhart Hauptmann's drama "*The weaver*" (*Die Weber*).

In the new *avant-garde* literature and also in painting before and after 1900 industrial technological society *as such* and in its *totality* becomes the subject of criticism in art and literature. In Rimbaud's "Illuminations" (Illuminations) of the years 1872 and 1873, it is modern cities themselves that form the subject of the poem "Villes" (cities). The poet characterizes them as "Acropolis of bureaucracy, beyond even the most powerful idea of barbarism".<sup>13</sup> The dimensions of the new imaginary city of the poem are huge. The cupola of one of the buildings measures "15000 feet diameter". That anticipated an idea which Hitler's architect Albert Speer had while planning to create a mega-hall in order to transform Berlin into the "world capital Germania". In addition, the Russian Socialist architects like Boris Iofan also planned a huge palace of the Soviets in Moscow.<sup>14</sup> Those architects were fascinated by gigantomaniac architectural projects.

That touches on the point of an *avant-garde*-style for even totalitarian systems. Some critics like Rolf Grimminger are in favour of the concept of an *avant-garde* even of totalitarian systems like the NS and also of the Soviets in the category of the "monumental sublime" (monumental Erhabene) of that architecture.<sup>15</sup> He pleads therefore for a "variety of modernities" and *avant-gardes* in style.

---

<sup>13</sup> "L'acropole officielle outre les conceptions de la barbarie moderne les plus colossales". Arthur Rimbaud: *Sämtliche Werke*. French and German. Translated by Sigmar Löffler and Dieter Tauchmann. Frankfurt a. M. 1992, 266.

<sup>14</sup> Berlin-Moskau. Catalogue. Ed. By Irina Antonowa and Jörn Merkert, München and New York, 3th ed., 1995, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Rolf Grimminger: Nationalsozialismus und Modernität, in: Silvio Vietta and Dirk Kemper (eds.): *Ästhetische Moderne in Europa. Grundzüge und Problemzusammenhänge seit der Romantik*. München 1998, 431 and 439.

Rimbaud as well as many architects of modernity were fascinated by the gigantic dimensions of their new visions of the megalopolis of the future. We sometimes find too in early German Expressionism a kind of fascination of the threatening demonology of the big city. In Georg Heym's poem, the "God of the city," this god sits on the houses like a sinister demon who sends out of his fist a "sea of fire/ through the streets" to destroy the city.<sup>16</sup> The avant-garde poetic view on the new civilization and its mega-cities is also influenced by the *Apocalypse* and its images of *destruction*.

In the art of Expressionism, the Jewish painter Ludwig Meidner painted a series of Images with the title "Apocalyptic Landscape" in 1913 - one year before the outbreak of the First World War. The whole series of Meidner's drawings show cities in destruction and under the bombardment of fire from heaven anticipating exactly that experience, not only of European but also Japanese cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his avant-garde-futuristic style, the city itself explodes in all directions, leaving no place safe for the human beings in it.

Within the First World War the critical language of the avant-garde radicalizes in a way that *modern technological* and *science* as such become the means of the *self-destruction* of society. This is the case – and we are now on level (C) of our category-system - in Georg Kaiser's "Gas"-Dramas in which the production of gas – we can substitute it today by atomic power – destroys the factory and the basis of human life. And that happens despite the correct formula for the gas-production. The formula "is correct and it is not correct".<sup>17</sup> The paradox is Kaiser's formula for the fact, that human rationality – even with a right formula – cannot avoid its destructive outcome, that a total control of the method of energy-production like gas or atom is impossible.

In spite of this and against good advice, the workers of the factory rebuild the gas-factory for the sake of producing energy and to have jobs. "Gas feeds our technology", says one of the abstract "Yellow Figures" of the Drama who are in military conflict with the "Blue Figures" (Gas. Zweiter

---

<sup>16</sup> Georg Heym, *Dichtungen und Schriften*. Ed. By Karl Ludwig Schneider, Hamburg 1964, 192 (translated by S.V.)

<sup>17</sup> The formula for the production of gas „stimmt und stimmt nicht“. Georg Kaiser. *Gas*. Erster Teil. In: Georg Kaiser, *Stücke, Erzählungen, Aufsätze, Gedichte*, ed. By Walther Huder, Köln and Berlin 1966, 179.

Teil, 240). Characters in this drama no longer have a personal identity, but are functions of the process including their military use as Yellow and Blue Figures. Their language is shortened to a “telegram”-style as invented by the new technological media.

In the second part of “Gas”-drama the Gas production is therefore resumed despite warnings. The drama in its second part shows the self-destruction of the technological civilization in an apocalyptic tone: “In the haze gray distance, the sheaves of fireballs whizz against each other - evidently in self-destruction.” (In der dunstgrauen Ferne sausen die Garben der Feuerbälle gegeneinander – deutlich in Selbstvernichtung), *ibid.* 254). For Kaiser, the destructive power of modern civilization leads to a non avoidable kind of self-destruction. The end of the drama show a “hall as a debris field” (Trümmerfeld), the human beings as “already whitened skeletons of men” (schon geweißte Skelette der Menschen.<sup>218</sup> That way, the radical criticism of the expressionistic avant-garde in art as well as in drama creates an apocalyptic imagery, presented in a total reduction of language and showing the end of mankind in the technical-military society - “worlds end” (“Weltende”) -, which is one of the main topics of the poetry of Expressionism. Also Fritz Lang’s Film “*Metropolis*” was strongly influenced by Kaiser’s drama. I can add that Kaiser also wrote a drama on the power of money within the modern society, “*Von morgens bis mitternachts*” (*From morning to midnight*) in which a bank cashier steals money from the bank. This man tests the life-value of money within the pleasure and entertainment machinery of the big city B. – that is Berlin – to find out, that it does not help to overcome his solitude and depression. Nietzsche’s notion of nihilism of the modern civilization is hanging over the city like the dark clouds over Berlin in Ludwig Meidner’s panels of the Apocalypse.

## **VI. Criticism of reason and rationality in the avant-garde – *formal* aspects**

If I so far have spoken mainly about the content of the literary criticism of the avant-garde, we can add some remarks about its *form*. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have had also a documented

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

criticism of the abuse of language by the new mass media. That criticism has been vocalized by poets as diverse as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Stefan George, Karl Kraus and authors of the Dadaism and Surrealism. One branch of this criticism leads to the attempt to *renew* language by *purifying* it in its poetic use. In particular the poetry of Mallarmé and Stefan George follow that trail in a form of a “poésie pure”, as Stéphane Mallarmé called it.

On the other hand we have a strong tendency in the avant-garde to *experiment* with the logical of language and even *destroy* it. This tendency finds a strong document in Futurism and especially in its first manifesto, written by Tommaso Marinetti. It is well known that Marinetti was fascinated by the modern technological world and he wanted to import its dynamism into poetry and art. His “parole in libertà” experiment with language. The manifesto proposes to destroy its traditional logical order of language. “One has to destroy the syntax” is even the first programmatic point of the manifesto and Marinetti believes in achieving that goal by abolishing adjectives, adverbs, punctuation and declining. Marinetti dreamt of a language of fast sequences of images represented by chains of nouns paying no heed to the fact that already the use of a noun as a noun means to use syntactical patterns.

Marinetti admired modern technology. But in the following avant-garde movements of Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism the bias of literature and art moved towards a strong criticism of modernity and also of the tradition of *rationality*, *logical subjectivity* and the rationality of *language*.

In her fundamental book on Georg Heym – and that now belongs to level (C) of our categorization -, Prof. Akane Nishioka underlined the point that in Heym’s lyrics, as in other works of the expressionistic avant-garde, we find a direct criticism of modern *rationality* and its modern concept of *reason* and *subjectivity*. Nishioka shows that Heym had studied the philosophy of subjectivity in Georg Simmel’s book on “Main problems of philosophy” and the philosophy of Herbart. The tendency of Heym and other authors of the expressionistic avant-garde now, is to destroy the notion of a *uniform logical subject*, to show *incongruities* within the ego and to do literary research in

phenomena such as *madness* and *hallucination*, which Heym undertook in his novel “*The Insane*” (*Der Irre*). Heym describes the “crisis of the modern subject”, as Nishioka calls it<sup>19</sup> and therefore belongs to a broad trend of the avant-garde, which had already taken root in the epoch of Romanticism and receiving strong support from the philosophy of Nietzsche. For him, the idea of a logical structure of the subject was more or less a fiction. Nietzsche himself did research in the pre-rational structure of the consciousness as well as the biological basis of our mind.

The criticism of the logical ego was a central tenet of Expressionism, and it became more so in Dadaism and Surrealism. In my book on Expressionism, I summarize this trend under the notion of “Ichdissoziation” (dissociation of the ego) which accompanies experiments of non-logical forms of text.<sup>20</sup> August Stramm and Jakob van Hoddis and then the Dadaists and Surrealists all experimented with those extra-normal surreal forms of writing.

And that tendency is closely linked to the *criticism of rationality* we mentioned before. In Expressionism especially Gottfried Benn shows how closely the one is bound to the other. In his short prose text on the figure of Dr. Rönne as well as in his dramolets on the subject of modern medicine, the strong criticism of rationality is directly bound to the urgent search for pre-rational states of mind. Dr. Rönne in Ithaka: “I have been logic up until throwing up. And when the fog was gone, what was it all? Words and the brain. Ever and ever again the horrible, eternal brain. We are crucified on that.”<sup>21</sup> Benn’s alter ego, Dr. Rönne, searches for “dream and inebriation (Traum und Rausch) as counter- or pre-rational states of mind. I have called that “pre-rational”, not “irrational”, because this literary search is completely different to the irrational power politics of the Third Reich, which Benn had short connections with in the year of 1933.

In the whole avant-garde of Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism the criticism of rationality itself leads to the destruction of the idea of a logical acting subject as well as the logical structure of language. Like Benn, Dr. Rönne and also the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, hate and mock about

---

<sup>19</sup> Akane Nishioka: Die Suche nach dem wirklichen Menschen. Würzburg 2006, 210.

<sup>20</sup> Silvio Vietta, Expressionismus. 6. Auflage. München 1994, 30ff.

<sup>21</sup> Gottfried Benn, Ithaka, in: Gottfried Benn, Prosa und Szenen, ed. By Dieter Welleshoff, Wiesbaden 1965, 298 translated by S.V.

science and logic: “I laugh about science and culture, those miserable safeguards of a society condemned to die” wrote Raoul Hausmann in a 1918 manifesto.<sup>22</sup> And that was directed not only against the politics that have caused a World War but also against the post-war attitude of the democratic politics of Weimar in Germany.

Six years later in his first Surrealist Manifesto, André Breton utters a fundamental criticism against occidental logic and its reign over the world: “We still live under the reign of logic [...] but it is only good for second range problems” writes Breton.<sup>23</sup> Breton looks for a way of writing and painting “without the control of reason”.<sup>24</sup> The avant-garde movements search for other, pre-rational or counter-rational forms of logic and with such an inclination fantasy and emotion play an important part as well as the logic of dreams in the Freudian tradition. The extra-logical *creativity* of mind is the new power by which the stagnation of reality and politics of the time are to be overcome. I can add: That was already an ideal of early Romanticism, mainly Novalis, who is mentioned by Breton in his second manifesto.<sup>25</sup> One can further add that the important experiments in drama and theatre after the second World War were still influenced by the pre-war avant-garde, mainly Surrealism. Good examples are the “Drama of the Absurd” and also the movements in theatre to get rid of logical structures in favour of the body and its actions.

## VII. Résumé

In this lecture I have made the proposal to distinguish between three levels of perception in order to understand better the movement of the avant-garde. The first level denotes the *macro-epoch* horizon of the European literary criticism since its beginning in ancient Greece and the classical tragedy, the level (B) denotes the *micro-epoch* of the avant-garde before and after 1900, which can and should be differentiated further in smaller units like the time before the First World War, the First World War and the time after, and (C) the perceptions of *individual* authors and artists. Our

---

<sup>22</sup> Dada. Eine literarische Dokumentation, ed. by Richard Huelsenbeck, Hamburg 1964, 33.

<sup>23</sup> André Breton, Die Manifeste des Surrealismus, Hamburg 1968, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>25</sup> Silvio Vietta, Ästhetik der Modernen. Text und Bild, München 2001, 117ff.



main thesis is, that already the on the perception-level (A) we find a continuous tradition of criticism of the one-sidedness of the rational society since the classical tragedy up until the novel and drama of modern ages. The level (B) of the avant-garde is characterized by a *radicalization* of that criticism and the more the worse the political situation deteriorated. The criticism of the avant-garde on the level of *contend* deals no longer only with characters and (male) representatives of the society but deals with the *modern rational civilization* as such. An author like Georg Kaiser – level (C) – criticizes the industrial process of energy production and its use in war as such. On the formal level the literary criticism of the avant-garde criticizes and attacks the logical structure of language and the Ego in order to destroy it or find other, alternative forms of logic and structure of the grammar. In art the main trend of the avant-garde is to destroy the traditional construction of the central perspective and to re-construct the object on the canvas by means of color and formal elements. Level (B) thus deals with the society on a much more *abstract* level, than level (A) did.

In my estimation a *research* project on the avant-garde finds several main areas of research like: - The area of a long term research project as Prof. Yamaguchi proposed it means to embed the avant-garde-project within the context of European history and literature. How are the relations between level (A) and (B), in how far did level (A) *prepare* level (B) in how far is (B) nevertheless *distinct* from (A)? Those questions would involve a detailed examination of the criticism of civilization also in the tradition of *philosophy*, mainly the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on the avant-garde, which was extremely strong. – Another main topic of research could be the analysis of the process of *radicalization* within the level (B), the avant-garde itself. That research could be done in the context of an analysis of the political process of imperialistic power politics up until the First World war and during its duration. It is evident, that the literary criticism radicalizes within the process of imperialistic policy up until and during the war. Many of the avant-garde artists regarded that war as a catastrophe of the occidental rationality as such. And then, of course, all research can concentrate on individual authors on level (C) questioning how that

author became acquainted with technics of the avant-garde, how did he or she developed it and transformed it into the individual work of that individual author. - A final question deals, of course, with the impact of the avant-garde on our own time. What can we learn by it in understanding the far advanced process of our own high-tech and economic society?