

Neomodernist trends in Russian and Ukrainian poetry of the second half of the 20th century: theoretical problems and the European context*

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In the history of Western culture and arts, the second half of the 20th century is generally identified with the establishment and affirmation of Postmodernism. In spite of the recent resurgence of *grand narratives* and the development of several other post- and postpost-, Postmodernism still seems to have a hold on both artistic production and criticism. In accordance with its famously ‘fluid’ nature and with the very nature of literary history, which is only seldom classifiable in terms of strict chronological boundaries, the beginnings and the possible end of Postmodernism cannot be undisputedly determined once for all. While according to some of its *coryphaei*, such as Ihab Hassan and William Spanos, the origins of Postmodernism date back to the Existentialist tradition (Hassan 1971, Spanos 1976), most scholars argue that it actually originated two or even three decades later¹. The same can be said of its conclusion, which either occurred in the 1990s, or has not even happened yet.

At a more general level, one can maintain that the very role of Postmodernism in the cultural and literary evolution of the last century remains open for discussion and possible further reassessments. Although the prefix post- in Postmodernism points to a continuation and modification of the modernist paradigm that ideally preceded and evolved into Postmodernism, it also reveals an overcoming of modernist trends, a rupture with it, albeit in many occasions an ironic and playful one. It is the very problem of the passage from a prevailing modernist paradigm to a postmodernist one around the mid-century that still requires thorough investigation. Even more neglected is the issue of the end of Modernism and of its ‘survival strategies’ in the second half of the century. Anglo-American scholars, whose contribution to the study of both Modernism and Postmodernism is invaluable, generally tend to situate the end of modernist culture in the 1930s, thus stressing the role of World War II and the subsequent reconstruction for the evolution of cultural and artistic tastes. According to this linear periodization, the shock of the war and the contemporary existentialist literary production allegedly laid the

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¹ On the discussion on Postmodernism and Existentialism and the origins of Postmodernism see Bertens (1986: 20-25).

basis for a radical change in cultural and aesthetic orientation, which resulted in the establishing of Postmodernism as the dominant literary trend in the following decades. This stepwise evolutionary narrative has recently been questioned by scholars of different fields in the humanities, who have pointed to the undeniable persistence of a modernist artistic sensibility in the literature of the 1950s-1980s. It goes without saying that the idea of the survival of a modernist approach to art after World War II opposes the narrow chronological understanding of Modernism as a mere category of literary and cultural history referring to a more or less circumscribed period, i.e. the first half of the 20th century. Drawing on a conception elaborated among others also by scholars of Slavic studies such as Edward Mozejko, a *stylistic* approach to Modernism as opposed to a strictly *chronological* one seems to pave the way towards new investigations and a global reconsideration of the literary history of the 20th century (Mozejko 2007). By the same token, Modernism has been defined by German scholar Helmuth Kiesel as a “Prozess aus Prozessen” (process consisting of processes, Kiesel 2004: 10), a definition which implies both its complex character and its considerable chronological lifespan.

In the field of English studies, the most significant contribution to a reevaluation of the literary history of the second half of the century is to be seen in Anthony Mellors’s 2005 monograph, which pursues the “late modernist” trend in the evolution of English poetry from Ezra Pound to Jeremy Halvard Prynne in the period 1945-1975. According to Mellors,

Late modernist texts remain true to the modernist imperative that eclecticism and difficulty form a hermeneutic basis for cultural renewal, but their belatedness involves a disavowal of the unifying and totalising gestures of modernist aesthetics. At issue here is the distinction between ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’: late modernism helps to identify a poetics which is neither a simple continuation of modernist practices, nor a decisive break with modernism’s various idealisations of the aesthetics (Mellors 2005: 2-3).

In Mellors’s conception, late modernism is thus identified by a set of aesthetic principles including an elitist idea of the text and a conservative approach to art as a sacred and obscure entity, originated from both semi-divine inspiration and noble craftsmanship. However, late modernism cannot ignore the challenges of its time and is therefore not to be deemed a simple, naïve continuation of the old, pre-war modernistic aesthetics. The role of the con-text in reshaping the artistic tenets of the ‘new Modernism’, so shaken by the trauma of (a second) war and of a divided world, cannot be overseen.

Other scholars have approached the evolution of the modernist sensibility from slightly different perspectives. In several contributions devoted to European literature of the 20th century from a comparative point of view, Peter Zima has defined his conception of *Spätmoderne* as a literary trend mainly characterized by the survival of the subjective principle (Zima 2001). While Mellors singles out hermetism and aesthetic elitism as the foremost features of late modernism, Zima has stressed the role of the subject and its struggle for survival in a hostile

and fragmented poetic world. Already called into question and deeply lacerated in the initial phase of Modernism, the late modern subject strives to maintain its central role in the poetic world. Although torn and only ‘sentimentally’ master of its ‘centripetal’ role, the late modernist subject thus appears to be in a safer position than its postmodern correlative, which has already and possibly definitively succumbed to the centrifuge power of history and the present. Remaining in the German-speaking area, an important step forward in the discussion of post-war Modernism is represented by Fabian Lampart’s monograph on modernist poetry in Germany between 1945 and 1960 (Lampart 2013). Lampart’s main concern has been to delve into the discussions around the survival of a modernist sensibility in post-Nazi Germany and to analyze the poetic outputs of that theoretical engagement with the recent history. This explains the strict chronological boundaries of his inquiry.

In the Slavic world, the main contribution to the study of Modernism in the second half of the 20th century is to be seen in Aleksandr Žitenev’s 2012 monograph on Russian poetry. Providing his readers with a thoroughly new insight into the history of contemporary poetry, Žitenev offers a narrative that is simultaneous and alternative to the ‘usual’ parabola of Postmodernism. Analyzing themes and artistic devices in Russian poetry from the 1960s up to the present day, Žitenev has pointed out the fundamental and copious neomodernist presence in its development. The category of literary history that he has chosen – “Neomodernism” – seems to stress both its rupture with the aesthetics of the first half of the century and its being a new realization and a re-contextualization of the modernist paradigm. First used by Frank Kermode in the 1960s (Kermode 1968: 1-32) in factual opposition to the idea of a fracture between what would become known as “Postmodernism” (“Neomodernism” in his conception) and “Palæo-Modernism” (Modernism of the first half of 20th the century), this term has been widely used in various cultural spheres, such as history of religion, philosophy, and architecture. In contrast, its critical success in literary studies has been mostly overshadowed by the binary dynamics of Modernism and Postmodernism. Still infrequent in literary studies, the term “Neomodernism” has enjoyed a major fortune in other branches of the humanities, including architecture, history of religion, and philosophy. Contrary to Dieter Lampart’s rigorous chronological delimitation, Žitenev has not drawn clear boundaries for Neomodernism, treating it rather as a more or less homogeneous trend that has spanned several decades up to the present day. The undeniable threshold function of the years 1985-1991, which brought about a revolution in cultural life and literary production, is thus – incorrectly – partially deprived of its fundamental significance in the history of former Soviet literatures.

In the Slavic and East European area, the narrative of an alleged clear-cut passage from a modern to a postmodern aesthetics² is even more called into question by the bulky presence of Socialist Realism. The plentiful and multifaceted literary heritage of modernist inspiration composed in the years between Stalin’s

² For a study of early Soviet Postmodernism see Eshelman 1997.

death and Gorbačëv's era should therefore be read through the prism of a fracture not only with the official Socialist-realistic aesthetics, but also with the modernist experience of the first half of the century. The intellectual and artistic freedom that had made possible and accompanied the creation of early Modernism, as opposed to the repression and segregation that constituted much of the social background of Soviet Neomodernism, obviously accounts for two – at least partly – distinguished phenomena. This implies that for the literary history of the former Soviet Union the term “Neomodernism” is undoubtedly more suitable than the term “Late Modernism” used by scholars of other literatures or comparative studies, such as Mellors and Zima. At the core of the idea of Neomodernism and of the prefix neo- that informs its characterization lies the assumption of a profound, painful break with the earlier modernist tradition. Basing itself on the legacy and the aesthetic tenets of its modernist predecessors, Neomodernism developed their model in an utterly different historical and cultural context, which obviously profoundly impacted the techniques, themes and the overall meaning of the new modernist literature, though still operating in the general framework of the modernist idea of art.

Wolfgang Iser maintained that the most complete realization of the modernist paradigm is to be found in lyrical poetry (Iser 1966). Russian and Ukrainian contemporary poetry seem to offer good proof to back this statement up, which obviously does not mean that neomodernist trends are alien to Russian and Ukrainian prose.

In the history of modern and contemporary Russian poetry, the fullest accomplishment of the neomodernist literary model is to be found in a part of the production of the so-called “Leningrad school”. Poetry constitutes one of the most important outputs of this complex and variegated chapter of recent Russian literature, made up of very different aesthetic orientations, literary styles and approaches to the role of art in Soviet society, ranging from Neo-Avant-Garde to hermeticism, and from dialogue attempts with the official establishment to full isolation.

A good example of a poem that aptly realizes the neomodernist paradigm is a poem by Michail Erëmin (1937) written in 1978:

Сомкнула веки. Не вступать, а погружаться
 В сокрытый ими сад. Деревья –
 Еще не алфавит, уже не древние аллеи текста.
 Любовь – еще вторая изгородь. Движение –
 Уже не ноша, но еще не ниша.

Не словом открывают губы
 Лучистый взгляд жемчужин
 Над моим лицом (Erëmin 1998: 11)

Though not necessarily being either a representative sample of the poetry of the Leningrad school or even of Erëmin's poetics³, this short poem offers a remar-

³ Describing Erëmin's poetics in his recent collection of sketches on contemporary Russian poetry, Dmitriij Bak underlined the philosophical and poetological character of Erëmin's work: “[...] явно различим один из центральных мотивов фило-

kable embodiment of the principles of neomodernist poetics. On a more general level, the dominant aesthetical category of the poem is hermeticism. The poem is not deprived of a unifying – albeit many-sided – semantic meaning, but this has to be quested for and understood slowly, which in turn strengthens the reader's aesthetic pleasure in apprehending the text. Moreover, resistance of signification and the marked aestheticization of the verbal texture seem to allude to the poetological meaning of the poem, which is focused on the power of the poetic world and its everlasting value. Last but not least, the architecture of the text is sustained by a well recognizable subject, who, despite openly manifesting itself only in the last verse, sustains and justifies the entire semantic construction of the poem.

Another important realization of the neomodernist model in the art of the Leningrad school is to be found in its so-called religious poetry. As Josephine von Zitzewitz put it, “the religious elements were conditional upon the artistic ones, in other words, art became a religious activity and vice versa” (von Zitzewitz 2015: 78). The penchant of many Leningrad poets, such as Viktor Krivulin, Elena Švarc, Aleksandr Mironov and Oleg Oxapkin, for a sacralization of art is a significant prove of their orientation toward modernist aesthetics and the modernist cultural experience of the first half of the century, in which the religion of art had played a fundamental role for the definition of the modernist sensibility.

As clearly shown in the few but solid works on the poetry of the Leningrad school (Sabbatini 2008, Lygo 2010), it is utterly impossible to identify a common denominator for such a large and diverse group of writers. On the other hand, the very fact that many of the Leningrad poets perceived themselves as the true heirs of the noble Petersburg tradition of the first half of the century bespeaks their conscious and active embrace of modernist aesthetics and their will to pursue its legacy in the adverse social and cultural conditions of the Stagnation.

The case of the Leningrad school aptly exemplifies one of the unavoidable problems that arise in the definition of a new literary trend. Analyzing the neomodernist trend in the poetry of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, it is necessary to draw a sharp distinction between a ‘totalizing’ neomodernist presence, that is Neomodernism as the prevailing aesthetic tension of a writer's oeuvre or poetic school, and the occasional appearance of neomodernist single texts or cycles in the broader context of an author's thematically and stylistically multifaceted work. In the context of the Leningrad school, a frequent neomodernist inspiration did not exclude its interaction and productive exchange with other literary tensions that were developed in the same artistic milieu, such as the Neo-Avant-Garde and early Postmodernism.

In the history of contemporary Ukrainian literature, the ‘double’ meaning of Neomodernism is shown by the contrast between two of the greatest poets of the second half of the 20th century, that is Vasyl' Stus (1938-1985) and Ihor Kaly nec' (1939). In the case of Stus, generally recognized as the most powerful poetic voice

софской лирики Еремина - стремление заглянуть за грань появления слова (=акта творения), попытка прочувствовать и описать контуры чувства либо мысли еще до их вербализации” (Bak 2015: 192).

of the period, neomodernist poetics plays a fundamental role as the ‘distinctive mark’ of his mature writing. The late Stus’s relatively monostylistic poetics stands in sharp contrast to the thirst for experimentation that characterized his earlier production.

In the artistic path of Ihor Kalyneć’s, a living poet from Galicia who has shared with Stus dissidence and imprisonment, one encounters several examples of a raw and (apparently) chaotic poetic language of evident postmodern intonation. At the same time, these more or less conscious experiments with the style of the *Zeitgeist* are carried out alongside other stylistic choices. Looking for an answer to Kalyneć’s astounding multifacetedness, Marko Pavlyshyn has defined his poetics as intrinsically (neo)baroque (Pavlyshyn 1993). According to the playful yearning for experimentation of both Baroque and Postmodernism, Kalyneć has also been the author of neomodernist texts. His neomodernist inspiration can be fully appreciated in *Lito (Summer)*, a poem from 1967 which is part of a complex textual structure of baroque inspiration, with plentiful neomodernist notes:

Вухами лопухів слухаю мушлю тиші,
причаєний під білими кронами кульбаб.
За розлуки ще один довгий тиждень,
що на циферблаті соняха добігає, пробач.

Я тепер у джмелине тремоло
заслуханий більше, ніж у власне єство.
Та інколи, від спогадів дощу обмоклий,
гріюся під животворним омофором строф.
І тоді ти мене то підносиш, то нищиш,
спалюєш на зеленолезих ватрищах трав.
І дуже шкода мені доброї мушлі тиші,
найбільшої втрати серед тисячі втрат (Kalyneć 2004: 72).

Albeit being open to various stylistic readings, this poem represents an excellent manifestation of the neomodernist spirit: the idea of the poetic text as a lofty and sacred construction, hermeticism as a refined strategy of signification, and a strong focus on subjectivity as a unifying principle. The energy of the subject – which in this poem appears to be stronger and self-confident than in most neomodernist texts, albeit being subjected to the inebriating force of music – is once again guaranteed by his allegiance to the poetic world and its magic power. The symbiotic relationship between the subject and the force that enables it to accomplish itself is a clear marker of the modernist *Weltanschauung* that informs the text.

Kalyneć’s ‘fluid’ poetics, which can accommodate neomodernist texts such as *Lito* alongside poetic prose and monostichs, is often compared to the art of some other representatives of the underground literature during the Stagnation period, including representatives of the so-called “Kyiv school of poetry”⁴. The

⁴ For a thorough introduction to styles and themes of the Kyivans see Pastux 2010. Pastux considers the Kyivans’ stylistic plurality a sign of their modern literary orientation.

Kyiv school consisted of a small group of writers born in the 1940s, united by similar aesthetic views as well as by a common refusal of both the Soviet cultural establishment and overtly political opposition to it. Their work exerted a major influence on the subsequent generation, the so-called *Visimdesjatyky* (Eightiers), which in turn paved the way for the affirmation of Postmodernism in Ukraine, although retaining and developing important neomodernist elements. Similarly to Kaly nec's poetics, the poetry of some representatives of the Kyiv School such as Mykola Vorobjov (1941) and Myxajlo Hryhoriv (1947-2016) shows neomodernist elements as a part of a many-sided poetic world that, once again, cannot be simply reduced to an early manifestation of a postmodern sensibility.

Moreover, as noted by Emily Lygo in the case of the Leningrad school (Lygo 2010: 5), it is important to stress that the social status of the writer does not necessarily imply their choice of a specific stylistic or thematic trend. So, in Ukrainian literature of the 1960s and 1970s, Neo-Avant-Garde functioned as an ideal stylistic link between the poetry of dissident writers, on the one hand, and that of the official and semi-official writers, on the other. At the same time, several neomodernist elements are to be found for example in the poetry of Pavlo Movčan (1939), who was tolerated by the Soviet authorities and later embraced a conservative political and social stance in independent Ukraine.

Both the cases of Russian and Ukrainian neomodernist traditions perfectly illustrate the challenges that emerge while attempting to define a more or less new, or rather ignored chapter of literary history. As the binary dynamics of an allegedly smooth passage from a modernist to a postmodernist aesthetics has revealed itself to be an insufficient tool to describe the complexity of the actual cultural evolution of the 20th century, the introduction of a 'new label' might also implicate further oversimplification if it were to be applied uncritically. It should once again be underlined that the occasional presence of neomodernist elements in the poetic world of an author or book of poetry does not automatically imply their belonging to an ideal neomodernist school. On the other hand, the heuristic value of Neomodernism as a new tool for text interpretation and literary history cannot be denied, since it allows to either aptly describe the general poetics of some writers, such as Vasyl' Stus, or to understand more or less important parts of the poetic worlds of other writers, alongside or competing with other stylistic and thematic trends. Its inclusion in the arsenal of contemporary humanities would thus significantly contribute to a more complete and multifaceted description of the literary dynamics of the second half of the 20th century. In the context of Ukrainian literature, the 'discovery' of Stus's Modernism has allowed to overcome the erroneous idea that Modernism in Soviet Ukraine had ceased to exist in the Stalin years⁵, thus showing the vitality of the modernist tradition well beyond World War II.

⁵ An idea that had found its most complete expression in the work of Solomija Pavlyčko, whose contribution to the study of modern and contemporary Ukrainian literature remains however invaluable. Pavlyčko saw the furthest expression of Modernism in Ukrainian literature in the post-war poetry of the American diaspora, thus exclud-

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ing post-war 'continental' Ukrainian literature. See Pavlyčko 1999. Moreover, Maria Grazia Bartolini has demonstrated the passage from (neo)Modernism to Postmodernism in the poetics of Jurij Tarnavs'kyj and the other members of the "New York Group". See Bartolini 2012.

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Abstract

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Neomodernist trends in Russian and Ukrainian poetry of the second half of the 20th century: theoretical problems and the European context

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the modernist presence in the poetry of the second half of the 20th century, with a focus on Russian and Ukrainian literature. On the basis of the available secondary literature and of concrete textual examples, the author points out the necessity of recognizing and properly analyzing this often neglected moment of recent literary history, which is usually eclipsed by the tendency to overstate the role of Postmodernism and other literary trends between the 1960s and the 1980s. The author also examines the differences between the Western and the Soviet contexts and the various roles that neomodernist poetics may have played in the poetry of different authors, collections, and schools.