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FORMS OF EXPERIMENTAL POETRY IN THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN CONTEXT SINCE THE 1960s

Abstract

In the present study, the author deals with the literary-historical and poetological circumstances of the notion of experimental poetry, noting this type of writing mainly in Slovak and Czech literature but against the broader background of Polish and Hungarian literature, i.e., in the Central European context. In particular, the author reflects on the communicability of texts constructed in this way. He chooses the 1960s as the initial period of his observations, but he also notes the experimental tendencies in poetry that preceded the 1960s, and at the same time, he moves from the 1960s to the 1990s and the developments in (Slovak) literature after the year 2000. From Slovak literature in the 1960s, he pays particular attention to the experimental work of M. Adamčiak, and from the most recent Slovak literature, he reflects on the work of P. Macsovszky and K. Zbruž. From a developmental point of view, the author focuses primarily on the significant influence of Czech literature on Slovak literature in the 1960s – especially the influence of the texts of L. Novák and V. Havel. The author also creatively builds on the metatexts of some literary scholars or creatively polemicises with their findings or further conjectures them (K. Ihringová, V. Křivánek, J. Šrank, M. Součková and others).

Keywords: experimental poetry, literary theory, aesthetic value, communicative contactivity of the text, Central European literary context, Milan Adamčiak, Kamil Zbruž

In the Central European cultural space, the 1960s are undoubtedly considered the golden era or the peak of experimental tendencies in literature in the 20th century. In developing the idea of a Central European cultural space, we have in mind the Slovak, Czech, Polish, and Hungarian contexts, and the fact that we are more concerned with the Czech-Slovak sessions is not accidental or in any way irrationally subjective. The connection of Hungarian and Polish literature to European avant-garde movements naturally existed here, but we should immediately add that literary currents such as *experimental/concrete poetry* or *experimental writing* did not develop or were not fully separated. In the field of Hungarian literature, we can mention the poet, typographer, and graphic artist Lajos Kassák (1887-1967), who is considered by literary history to be the most important personality of the avant-garde movements in Hungary. In his work, one can find the practices of Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism and Expressionism. He became famous as the author of the so-called “constructivist paintings” (“pictorial architecture”) and the poem *A ló meghal a madarak kirepülnek* (“The horse dies, the birds fly away”) from 1922, which many experts place in the context of Apollinaire’s *The Passage* or the poetic composition *The Waste Land* from T. S. Eliot. The writer, poet and literary critic Peter Macsovszky also draws attention to Kassák’s “shorter, experimental texts, straddling the line between the short story and prose poems (*Tragic figures*, 1919)”¹. However, names such as Emil Szittya (1886-1964; his prose *Das Kuriositäten-Kabinett. Begegnungen mit seltsamen Begebenheiten, Landstreichern* (“The Cabinet of Curiosities. Encounters with strange occurrences, vagrants”) from 1923 has been preserved in Hungarian), Sándor Barta (1897-1938), Erzsi Újvári (1899-1940), Aladár Komjat (1891-1937) and Andor Németh (1891-1953) also deserve attention. The latter two were close to surrealist poetry, while Barta consistently wrote Dadaist poems. Not to be overlooked is the poet Károly Sirató Tamkó, better known by his artistic name Charles Sirató (1905-1980) – the aforementioned Macsovszky notes about him: “with his

¹ <https://zurnal.pravda.sk/esej/clanok/362975-nebojme-sa-madarskej-literarnej-moderny/> [Accessed 23.03.2022].

visual poems – he wrote the first one in 1924 – he announced the advent of postmodernism. However, he approached the creation of visual poetry not through the typographic solutions of the typeface but the arrangement of words in space, and his themes and lexis are also remarkable, taking inspiration from science and, later, from certain spiritual tendencies². The appellation “Hungarian Joyce” or “Hungarian Musil” could undoubtedly be applied to the novelist Miklós Szentkuthy (1908-1988) – his debut novel *Prae* (1934) is a 1200-page eclectic collage prose that can form a unified poetological trajectory with J. Joyce’s *Ulysses* or R. Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*.

In Poland, the situation is quite different because the formal experiments in 20th-century literature have been entirely, even exclusively, applied in works for children. The literary scholar P. Winczer (2000) even considers the relatively direct influence of the linguistic experiments of the poet Julian Tuwim (1894-1953) on the work of Miroslav Válek (his translation of Tuwim’s *Cuda i dziwy* („Miracles and Wonders”) from 1961 is considered congenial by translation critics) and Lubomir Feldek from the mid-1960s onwards. Alongside Tuwim, Jan Brzechwa (1898-1966), later two extremely talented “pupils” of Tuwim, developed various mutations of linguistic experimentation in his work for children: Joanna Kulmowa (1928-2018) and Wanda Chotomska (1929-2017), who develop a “nonsense-fairy-tale type of writing that exploits the child’s joy in word-formation, in puns, in ‘breaking the language’, in creating imaginative playful situations in which the child’s perceiver is drawn into the game.”³

In Czech literature, these are mainly representatives of concrete and phonic poetry: Ladislav Novák (prepared texts and constellations in the collection *Pocta Jacksonu Pollockovi* („A tribute to Jackson Pollock“) from 1966), Václav Havel (collection *Antikódy* (“Anticodes”) from 1963), resp. poets such as Emil Juliš, Jiří Kolář, Josef Hiršal, Zdeněk Barborka, Vladimír Burda and others, whose varied texts form the anthology *Vrh kostek: Česká experimentální poezie* („Litter of Cubes: Czech Experimental Poetry“), which was compiled in the 1960s, but published by Torst up in the

² <https://zurnal.pravda.sk/esej/clanok/362975-nebojme-sa-madarskej-literarnej-moderny/> [Accessed 23.03.2022].

³ P. Winczer, *Súvislosti v čase a priestore. Básnická avantgarda, jej prekonávanie a dedičstvo (Čechy, Slovensko, Poľsko)*, Bratislava: VEDA – Vydavateľstvo slovenskej akadémie vied 2000, pp. 270.

1993. From the terminological aspect, the general term *experimental poetry* is here “fragmented” into precisely nuanced categories and subcategories such as *processual texts* (Z. Barborka), *typograms, grotesque poems and binary poetry* (L. Nebeský), *structural poems* and *kinetic poetic formations* (J. Procházka), *constellations, annihilations, prepared texts, associative macromolecules* or *detective texts* (L. Novák), *contentless poems, illiterate poems* (J. Kolář) or *verbal permutations* or *stochastic texts* (J. Hiršal and B. Grögerová). An attempt to define a substantial categorial hierarchy, built from the tribal concept of *experimental poetry*, is offered in her study by K. Ihringová, for example, when she writes:

Often the term “experimental poetry” is used for a variety of literary and artistic expressions whose common denominator is precisely the experiment in the plane of form, i.e. in the plane of language. Therefore, under this common denomination we can include *visual poetry*, working with visual means of expression; *phonetic poetry*, in which the phonetic (sound) side dominates over the semantic side; *conceptual poetry*, built from complex language games and tautologies; *cybernetic poetry*, working with computer programs generating new texts; and *object-based poetry*, in which the words of a poem are rendered in the form of a visual object. However, classification was inevitably preceded by a new (experimental) way of writing such a previously unconventional poem. The poem abandoned its strong attachment to semantics, freed itself from the shackles of traditional signification, and turned toward purity of language, toward and sonority. In Max Bense's words, a new variant of poetry emerged, the so-called *artificial poetry*, which renounced philosophical, psychological or personal statements and, under the influence of the proliferating semiotics and the theory of the sign, became an impersonal, non-subjective work, without any signs of individuation and subjectification.⁴

The considerations of V. Křivánek, who, despite his initial “reluctance” to categorise anything (“There is considerable terminological freedom in the labelling of individual types of experimental poetry”⁵), nevertheless proceeds to a strict distinction:

⁴ K. Ihringová, *Experimentálna poézia a jej podoby v slovenskom vizuálnom umení* [In:] „Slovenská literatúra“, 58, Nr. 4. 2011, pp. 317–318.

⁵ V. Křivánek, *Pět podob experimentu v české poezii dvacátého století* [In:] „Bohemica Olomoucensia“ 1. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci 2010, pp. 22.

According to the material it works with and what it addresses in the perceiver, experimental poetry can be divided into concrete poetry (it works with language as a material, analyses it and creates various unusual compositions according to certain rules), phonic poetry (it is based on the arrangement of phonemes and other sounds into new phonorhythmic series, which it records – related to modern music), visual poetry (it uses graphic forms of recording, combining word and image – related to visual art).⁶

Among the fundamental views that shaped the Czechoslovak current of experimental poetry and new theoretical approaches to language from the 1960s onwards (Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová) were the theoretical concepts of A. A. Moles⁷ (*Manifesto of Permutational Art*) and E. Gomringer⁸ (*From Verse to Constellation*).

Constellation, permutation, realisation, variation or demonstration become the new artistic methods of constructing a poem for them. Abraham A. Moles says in his manifesto that we are entering a permutational art in which permutation is understood as a combination of simple elements with limited discriminative power. This artistic principle opens up new possibilities of perception. We can only truly grasp the full meaning of permutational art in the machine age. Eugen Gomringer, in his manifesto *From Verse to Constellation*, argues that each age speaks its own language. Today's man differs from those of the past in that he wants to understand very quickly, hence the formal simplification of language. Such simplification has become the essence of the new poetry, and poetry has been placed in a parallel position with the visual arts, which, also thanks to Kandinsky, Klee and Mondrian, have sought to uncover their original materials and means of expression. Constellation is defined as a group of words that are chained together or side by side, it is both unique and untranslatable. In this

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Abraham André Moles (1920 – 1992) was a technical engineer, doctor of physics in acoustics, philosopher and communication theorist. In his research, he was the first to attempt to find relations between aesthetics and information theory, or between aesthetics and the language of science. He tried to apply the strictly scientific definition of language and its communicative functions to the language of art.

⁸ Eugen Gomringer (1925) is a German poet of Bolivian origin who is considered by literary critics as the spiritual father of concrete poetry in Germanophone countries. In theoretical articles, studies and manifestos, he strives to find correspondences between the language of concrete poetry and the language of concrete art. Until recently, he was director of the Institut für Konstruktive Kunst und Konkrete Poesie (IKKP) in Rehau, Germany.