

## Avant-garde

The concept of "avant-garde" [vanguard] is quintessentially French for three reasons:

First, the concept of "avant-garde" corresponds exactly to the symbolic representation of authority and preeminence in French culture. While in the Anglo-Saxon world, preeminence and excellence are generally symbolically represented on a vertical axis: Top dog, Top twenty, etc. French see preeminence on a horizontal axis; this is why the major sporting event is **Le Tour de France**, because for this type of sport the best performer is the one that **precedes** all the other competitors on an horizontal axis. In any army, the unit which is at the forefront of a battle is the "avant-garde".

Second, the concept of avant-garde is a military metaphor. Since the beginning of French Literature, the literary field has been assimilated to a battlefield. At the birth of French national literature, in the sixteenth century, the first group of writers was labeled "La Brigade" [The brigade]. What was at stake in that war? The total domination of the contemporary field of "belles-lettres", the certainty that Tout Paris had her eyes on the winners and would celebrate them just as if they were the generals of a victorious campaign. France has always been a centralized country and thus there is only one prize: to conquer the heart of Paris, or even more specifically, to conquer the heart of the intelligentsia located in two major areas of Paris: the 5th and the 6th arrondissements [districts] commonly recognized as the "Latin Quarter". This is the area for the major universities and the main publishing houses. The first occurrence of the concept of "Avant-garde" in the sense that it is used today is associated with the work of a major social and economical philosopher from the beginning of the nineteenth century, Claude Henri de Saint-Simon who wrote, in his 1825 book *Opinions Littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles* : "We, the artists, will be the vanguard of the intellectual revolution. The power of art is in fact the most effective and the fastest. We have all sorts of weapons: when we want to propose new ideas, we

engrave them in marble or we draw them on a canvas." The idea of art at the forefront of the intellectual revolution is still very much present in the mid-nineteenth century, again associated with the idea of a revolution, and all French revolutions begin in Paris. At the end of the nineteenth century the value of the term changes and is then associated with specific artistic groups that are considered at the forefront of the esthetic exploration and break the accepted artistic routine. The concept of the collective revolutionary enlightenment fades away and the term "avant-garde" is commonly used to designate the artistic group, among several, which seems to offer a new approach to esthetic conceptualization, no longer involved with current **thematic** motifs but in exploring new venues, thus **experimental** in the process of discovery.

In my opinion, the third and last reason why the concept is characteristically French is the fact that from 1789 to 1968 the main approach to change is that it is the result of a short revolution, a reversal of fortune during which everything is turned upside down. This view implies a belief that the progress of mankind, or art, is the result of a "rupture", a radical break that suddenly ushers in the new and converts everything else that pre-existed into an unfashionable and former mode of thinking. This dialectical movement marked by a dramatic change is at the core of the Lettrisme [Letterism] movement of Isidore Isou in the early 1950's. His understanding of the evolution of world literature is a constant shift from "le ciselant", his name for the swift introduction of the new, and "l'amplique", his name for the moment when the contemporary society absorbs the new dimension and it becomes a *doxa*, an accepted model, that is simply repeated by mere followers who, in turn, will be displaced by the occurrence of a new "phase ciselante", a new vanguard as it is usually introduced by a genius personality that is the carrier of "innovation" or what Isou calls "novatique". Isou was not able to impose his views but during the turbulent intellectual years of the late 1960's and early 1970's in France, the influential group *Tel Quel*, associated with the "Pensée 68" theoretical movement, with Barthes and Foucault, placed the theory of the "rupture" [break], at the core of its doctrine in order, collaterally, to impose its own image as a "mouvement de la rupture" [breaking away movement]. *Tel quel*

assigned the original birth of modern thinking to the "epistemological break" around the year 1886. In that year Mallarmé had published most of his texts that will appear in 1888 in his only book *Album de Vers et de Prose*, but this is also the year of the publication of the first "modern" literary manifesto: the Greek born French poet Moréas published the *Manifesto of Symbolism* in the newspaper *Le Figaro*. This text marks the global acceptance of Baudelaire's concept of "Modernism" as expressed in his text *Le Salon de 1856* in which he offered a definition of what should be considered "relativist" art as opposed to the traditional "pure art" [Ktema es aei] == a treasure for eternity, a concept which had dominated Western Art for many centuries. By expressing the fact that art was part eternal and part contemporary, Baudelaire made it possible to consider the "contemporary" part of any artistic expression as the criteria of the "modernity" of a piece. He exposed the triumph of this understanding of art as always seeking the expression of its **own contemporaneity** rather than something eternal. Thus when in his *Manifesto* Moréas claims: "Like all the arts, Literature evolves: in a cycle with its returns strictly determined [...]. It is clear how each new phase in artistic evolution corresponds precisely with the senile decrepitude, the ineluctable end of the school just before it...", he creates the routine conception that literature, and art, proceed through successive brutal and antagonistic steps. That is the basic epistemological principle that allows the **creationist** concept of **avant-garde** to exist.

These three basic French cultural and intellectual peculiarities explain why the concept of avant-garde has appeared in the French critical vocabulary and has been so widely used.

Now the question that we have to ask is why the triumphant 1970 affirmation of the epistemological principle of "rupture" that seems to legitimize the operative value of "avant-garde" is also the historical moment when the word "avant garde" disappears from French usage; why it no longer describes what is perceived as "new" in artistic and literary production.

Today in French critical circles no one would dare use the term; it is considered obsolete, inadequate and the French critical terminology has banished it from its operative vocabulary except when it describes historical vanguards such as Symbolism, Dada, Futurism, Surrealism and, reluctantly, Lettrisme. The term "avant-garde" today seems to single out movements that existed roughly between 1886 and 1958.

I would like to briefly advance a few suggestions to try to explain why a new paraphrastic vocabulary such as "extreme contemporain" [extreme contemporary], post-poésie [post-poetry], postmoderne, post-générique, and the term now adopted by Ma in our Poetics Colloquium meetings, post-contemporain [post-contemporary] has gained commodity value to designate "new" artistic or literary trends.

At the end of what may be considered the closure of productive Surrealism, in the mid 1930's, France underwent a Philosophical Renaissance in the line of the early work of Henri Bergson. For Bergson's intuitionism, the "new" is not the result of a purely unadulterated discrete creation, but results from the unraveling of a previously existing situation. Bergson's "élan vital" is a rejection of the notion that simple brutal mechanical physical forces engender the new. Bergson accepts the principle of evolution as advanced by Darwin but rejects any automated finalism and determinism. Merleau-Ponty will add his consideration on the intersubjectivity of the subject and phenomenologist views that any object considered is already a representation of other objects also present. Between the old master and the new thinker, the period from the 1920's to the 1940's was mostly influenced by the fundamental work of the great philosopher of that period, Gaston Bachelard. In his seminal book *Le nouvel esprit scientifique* [in English *The New Scientific Mind*] 1934, Bachelard does not go against the idea of a discontinuous nature of history of sciences but he advances what has been called a "constructivist epistemology". The core of his philosophical doctrine for science is that we can take for granted the idea of an "epistemological break" but we cannot see it as a momentous revolution; we cannot envision it as specifically timed rupture. At one point we can recognize that we are involved in a

dominating epistemology and at another time that we are part of another epistemology, but the transition can be a very complex one and is based on a long underground process. For Bachelard, epistemologies integrate old epistemologies into new paradigms, changing the sense of operative concepts. At one given moment of history there is always a theory that is emerging while another one is in decline and thus any contemporary intellectual life is marked by the co-presence of competing epistemologies. Under that scenario, Dada includes many aspects of Futurism, and Tzara cannot claim that he created Dada in Zurich in 1916 from nothing; under that scenario Surrealism does not break with Dada but integrates and transforms Dada and consequently Breton cannot claim that he created Surrealism as the result of a miraculous inner vision in December 1924. There is always something already here and thus avant-garde as a clear, clean break is a fallacious illusion. Because Bachelard's ideas integrate both rupture and continuity they came back in fashion during the **post-structuralist moment** of the early 1970's. By then French intellectual life started to reject the epistemological dogma articulated on a collection of simple binary oppositions that had been the trademark of "scientific" functional structuralism. Progressively all critical aspects that accepted a simple binary dialectical opposition were rejected. That is the moment when Habermas' theory of the resolution of the extremes became credo in certain European circles and when a "pure" poet such as Michel Deguy coined the term "extreme contemporain" for his newly created poetic collection for the French publisher Belin. This gesture showed that he was doing something new for the current contemporaneity of the 1970's but within the continuity of French "pure" poetry, in the line of Mallarmé, Valéry, Char etc. While for him there was a multitude of poetic creations that more or less were mirrors of each other, nevertheless his new literary creation should be perceived as located at the extreme limit of this collective contemporaneity. The same reasoning is at the core of the creation of post-poésie by Jean-Marie Gleize, who characterizes his gesture as an "exit inside" and, in an interview a year ago stated explicitly: "I am constantly appalled when reading reviews of contemporary literature by the journalistic tendency to reduce everything to a simple bipolarization between the old and the new accompanied by value judgments on this work or this one. I do

not want to situate myself in a polemical system where a group is opposed to another group. I was raised at the beginning of the last avant-garde movement of the seventies and was given the impression that literature was a battlefield. [...] This type of debate is useless, sterile, without any interest. Our differences are useful; we should work with them and try to understand them. Books with which you disagree have a great advantage, they make you work; they force you to come up with an answer."

Gleize's negative reaction to the possibility of something today similar to the chronic antagonism of the previous avant-gardes is mild by comparison with the visceral rejection of the concept by the current master thinker of OuLiPo, Jacques Roubaud who, in his book *Poésie, Ménage, etc. [Poetry, clean up, etc.]* asserts: "any attempt by the avant-garde to put an end to poetry is doomed if it is not accompanied by a formal comprehension of what poetry is. Unfortunately, the avant-garde never has the time for comprehension". Roubaud's main objection to any form of avant-garde is perfectly coherent with the second stated objective of OuLiPo which can be described as a conservative program: to explore all existing literary forms, past and potential. This thesaurization is incompatible with the **radical iconoclastic gesture** of any avant-garde. Nevertheless the irony of History is fully present here. The 1961 unsigned "propos de l'éditeur" ["Editor's foreword"] that precedes the inaugural *Manifesto* of Oulipo and which was written by Raymond Queneau can only be seen as a drastic written act that has as its real aim to put an end once and for all to the existence of Surrealism, the still dominating literary movement with an "avant-garde" label at the time, and a movement which was under the direction of his brother in law, André Breton. All the articles of the founding document of OuLiPo can be read as written to systematically counter each constituting principle of Surrealism: control against intuition, grammar against chance, ownership against anonymous collective responsibility, form against content, etc. An act of clear duplication of the negative and destructive mode of establishment of any previous avant-garde movement, the founding of OuLiPo was still following in the logic of avant garde **creationism** against the more subdued tradition of **evolutionist** change which

seems to be a contemporary norm of the *extreme contemporary*. But what the *post-contemporary* will bring us?

One may ask why the birth of the "avant-garde" literary label is concomitant to the realization by Baudelaire that as far as the new esthetics of "modernity" was concerned, the "contemporaneity" had something to do with it. The term "modern" does not appear by chance as the term selected by Baudelaire to define his understanding of a new estheticism; it has a long cultural history in French letters. In 1688, the French author Charles Perrault publishes the first of his four volumes of *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes*. This book is at the core of what is known in French literary history as "La querelle des Anciens et des Modernes." Charles Perrault is the defender of the "modern" view that contemporary literature can be and is as good as classical literature. The polemic started when he published his poem "*Le siècle de Louis le Grand*" an encomium piece to the then French king Louis XIV as an enlightened ruler who had done so much for the arts that now they were an improvement over classical productions. Immediately, Boileau-Despréaux attacked him and became, with Racine, the leader of the party of the "Anciens" who refused the supremacy of contemporary art over classical productions, but also, denounced a devotion to actual matters and, as in the case of Perrault, a clear subjection to the current political power. The historical quarrel between the two leaders was eventually resolved when Perrault and Boileau-Despréaux embraced in front of the whole French Académie and Boileau-Despréaux became the official biographer of the king; nevertheless, its implication continued under one form or another during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Baudelaire knew then perfectly well what it meant to reactualize the notion of "modern" in his 1856 text on the modern poet and on the modernity in art. Often, it is believed that this embrace of contemporaneity by Baudelaire is also at the core of Rimbaud's esthetic views as expressed in the conclusion of his text *A Season in Hell*: "Il faut être absolument moderne - one has to be absolutely modern"). In fact if one does a careful close reading of the passage, the quote by Rimbaud can only be seen as an "anti-phrase": Rimbaud hates his contemporaneity, that's for him petty bourgeois mediocrity, the

cowardly conformism of a decidedly materialist society. If publically rewarded poetry (as the one he sees published by his own contemporary writers: Sully Prudhomme, François Coppée, Banville, etc.) is what the poet "owes to Society", to be part of a mediocre bourgeois universe that he has despised, then he does not want anything to do anymore with "poetry." In order to be "his own contemporary" he might as well be part of his time, be in his world, become totally engulfed in its mores and issues. If, against all poetic odds, contemporaneity in its materialistic ugliness cannot be ignored, then he will abandon poetry to become first a soldier of fortune, then a commercial trader and finally a gun runner for the king Menelik the 1st to help him in his freedom fight against the English colonialists. Contemporaneity calls.

"Il faut être absolument moderne" for Rimbaud is a negative, at this juncture of his work, it means an abandon of his poetic "vision," his dreams and a life of poetic creation.

This intrinsic linkage between "contemporaneity" and "modernity" introduced an historically core factor in the determination of what was considered art at a given period. Historization gave way to a periodization and certainly the concept of "avant-garde" can be interpreted as a sub-product of art as part of the *zeitgeist*. In its most excessive variant one can find "art engagé" (following Sartre's idea as proposed in his journal *Les Temps Modernes*) with the writer necessarily involved in the debates (political, sociological, ideological) of the time and, "realist", "interventionalist" art such as the one championed by Louis Zukowski and perceived as the underpinning of today's extreme contemporary poetic works such as those by Perelman and Bernstein (*Girly Man*) in the US and Gleize (*Altitude zéro*) in France.

It is thus not surprising that today the poetry which is considered the most innovative is the one which sees its role as to "express your contemporaneity." A great part of the "extreme contemporary" writing is to express and present a realist view of everyday life. Out of his six volumes on poetics, Henri

Meschonnic's best known slogan is "être son propre contemporain -- in poetry, to be your own contemporary".

This, in my view, is a flagrant misreading of what "modernity" is supposed to be. Unfortunately, due in part in a "political" responsibility -- *engagement* -- in the European tradition and the usual bend on presentism of American culture, current general poetics has now accepted as natural the adhesion of the expression to the contemporary. Far from surpassing or bypassing "modernism" in that aspect, the a-historical "post-modernism" fits that trend and reinforces it in a dramatic manner since it selects to obliterate any sense of archeology, succession and historical accumulation: **each** component (metrics, theme, image, word, etc.) that is summoned in a postmodern poetic piece is immediately recognized as "contemporary", as an expression of a possible "hic et nunc." This is an unfortunate and deeply conservative trend, and for me, in every sense, there is "no future in post-modernism."

**Slavoj Žižek** recently reflected on the possibility that rejecting current capitalism *en bloc* was probably a short-sighted strategy; for him, we should not ignore that western capitalism is also what brought us the idea of democracy and happiness and that maybe they were linked by intrinsic values that are inseparable; thus if we value democracy maybe the urgency is not to call for the replacement of capitalism by communism or a theological system which has not proven that it can be compatible with a (better) democratic system. In an analogical way, so far nothing has proven that modernist poetics can be productively replaced by something that would be esthetically "better" than the model that Baudelaire proposed, since, we have to remember, his text is also contemporary to the establishment, all over the world, of modern democracies. We just have to remember that Hitlerian fascism invented the censurable concept of "degenerate art" and that recent totalitarian regimes have invented the concept of "petty bourgeois esthetics," this without mentioning all these recent and ancient cases when religious fervor attempted to ban art pieces because they did not seem to fit in with a religion-based moral order.

To propose today an intellectual posterity to Baudelaire's modernity, an "extra-modernism" so to speak, one has thus to place itself in a "post-contemporary" framework. Poetry has to disengage itself from the simple tyranny of contemporaneity ("extreme" or not) and to offer a prospect on the future; it has to invent the future. The poet has to accept to be more than simply his own contemporary, and short of terms, it can be said that the poet has to invent the future. His poetry has to envision what poetry could be, both thematically and in terms of means and new forms of expression. Maybe there is no contemporary reward in this, but at least it will reactivate the power of the imagination, the capacity to invent new modes of being more and better alive and envision the foundations for the significance of a world to come. If we want to enter a "post-contemporary" era of poetry, we have to add something to Baudelaire's "relativist" view of beauty: what Rimbaud in his most extraordinary moments calls "le voyant" ["the visionary"]. The poet cannot simply be of "his/her time" (s)he has to have the gift of foresight. Poetry has to include the permanent, the actual and the future.

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