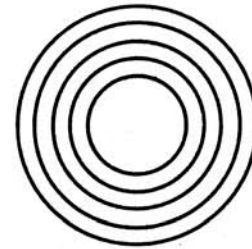


THE THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Renato Poggioli



translated from the Italian by Gerald Fitzgerald

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CONTENTS

1. *THE CONCEPT OF THE AVANT-GARDE* 1
Prologue. Terminological ups-and-downs. The two avant-gardes.
A novel concept, a novel fact.
2. *THE CONCEPT OF A MOVEMENT* 16
Schools and movements. The dialectic of movements. Activism.
Antagonism.
3. *ROMANTICISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE* 42
Popularity and unpopularity. Romanticism as a precedent.
Down-with-the-past. Anticipations.
4. *AGONISM AND FUTURISM* 60
Nihilism. Agonism. Futurism. Decadence.
5. *FASHION, TASTE, AND THE PUBLIC* 78
Fashion, avant-garde, and stereotype. Intelligentsia and elite.
The intellectual elite. The avant-garde and politics.
6. *THE STATE OF ALIENATION* 102
Art and society. Psychological and social alienation. Economic and
cultural alienation. Stylistic and aesthetic alienation.

7. <i>TECHNOLOGY AND THE AVANT-GARDE</i>	130
Experimentalism. Scientificism. Humorism. Nominalistic proof.	
8. <i>AVANT-GARDE CRITICISM</i>	148
Prerequisites. The problem of obscurity. Judgment and prejudgment. Criticism, right and left.	
9. <i>AESTHETICS AND POETICS</i>	174
Dehumanization. Cerebralism and voluntarism. Metaphysics of the metaphor. The mystique of purity.	
10. <i>HISTORY AND THEORY</i>	208
Historical parallels. Modernity and modernism. The overcoming of the avant-garde. Epilogue.	
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
<i>Index</i>	241

Je juge cette longue querelle de la tradition et de l'invention
De l'Ordre de l'Aventure
Vous dont la bouche est faite à l'image de celle de Dieu
Bouche qui est l'ordre même
Soyez indulgents quand vous nous comparez
A ceux qui furent la perfection de l'ordre
Nous qui quêtions partout l'aventure

Nous ne sommes pas vos ennemis
Nous voulons vous donner de vastes et d'étranges domaines
Où le mystère en fleurs s'offre à qui veut le cueillir
Il y a là des feux nouveaux des couleurs jamais vues
Mille phantasmes impondérables
Auxquels il faut donner de la réalité
Nous voulons explorer la bonté contrée énorme où tout se tait
Il y a aussi le temps qu'on peut chasser ou faire revenir
Pitié pour nous qui combattons toujours aux frontières
De l'illimité et de l'avenir
Pitié pour nos erreurs pitié pour nos péchés.
—Guillaume Apollinaire,
from "La Jolie Rousse" (Calligrammes)
copyright 1956 by Editions Gallimard

[This long quarrel I judge: tradition—invention
Order—Adventure
You whose speech is made in the image of God's speech
Speech equal to order's own self
Be easy on us when you are comparing
Us and those who were the perfection of order
Us looking all around for adventure

Us not your enemy
Who want to present you strange mighty lands
Where flowering mystery surrenders itself to the takers
Where new fires are and colors unseen
Phantasms by the thousands weightless
Which need to be given reality
And we want to explore bounty's enormous land all stillness
Where time is to banish to call back
Pity us battling always at the limits
Of limitlessness and tomorrow
Pity our errors pity our sins.
—translated by Gerald Fitzgerald]

7. TECHNOLOGY AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Experimentalism

A whole series of relations has thus far been established: activism, or the spirit of adventure; agonism, or the spirit of sacrifice; futurism, or the present subordinated to the future; unpopularity and fashion, or the continual oscillation of old and new; finally, alienation as seen especially in its cultural, aesthetic, and stylistic connections. From these derives a further category, which may be summed up by saying that one of the primary characteristics of avant-garde art is, technically and formally, *experimentalism*. It is in fact evident that in each of the above categories there inheres a single stimulus sufficient to lead the avant-garde artist to experiment. But we hardly need say that, in the majority of cases in which the experimental comes into play, a variety of stimuli and a complex of multiple motivations determine its activity.

The experimental factor in avant-gardism is obvious to anyone having even a summary knowledge of the course of contemporary art. To use only examples offered by the word-arts, suffice it to say that for three quarters of a century the history of European poetry and literature has not only been a series of movements such as naturalism and decadence, symbolism and futurism, dadaism and

surrealism; it has also been a sequence of creations, adoptions, and liquidations of technical forms like free verse and unrestricted verse, the prose poem and experiments in the free association of words, polyphonic prose and the interior monologue. The experimental nature of the avant-garde is furthermore programmatically stated in many of the labels coined for new formal tendencies and technical researches, especially in the plastic arts. Few movements in painting have neglected to indicate by way of their names what the meaning or direction of their work was, as certainly was the case of those painters who accepted the epithet of *fauves*. If there have been larger movements, like futurism and surrealism, which manifested their figurative ideals in special programs, defined in more or less specific formulas, like plastic dynamism or metaphysical painting, the history of painting and sculpture of our time abounds in aesthetic movements or currents with names that are themselves a manifesto or program. The most significant case in this respect is impressionism, all the more so because of the supreme importance of the movement so named. Perhaps it is just because of this implicit or confessed characteristic of serious formal commitment that impressionism, for all its placidly serene inspiration and the quiet integrity of its work, must be considered a genuinely avant-garde movement, perhaps the first coherent, organic, and consciously avant-garde movement in the history of modern art. Further, that was the opinion of witnesses at the time, almost all hostile and foremost among them the public and the contemporary academics; and such is also the opinion of witnesses of today, almost all favorable. One of the latter, Massimo Bontempelli, is certainly not altogether off the mark when he says that in a certain sense all the avant-gardes derive from impressionism, even though at times we have derivation by opposition, as in the case of expressionism.

The name *cubism* is of similar significance and scope, and from its experimentations come also those tendencies given the generalized label of *abstract art*; in the same way, from the particular researches of impressionistic painting came divisionism and pointillism. Regarding the architectural avant-garde (about which I shall say

something later), we find only designations that underline the experimental—for example, functionalism or rational architecture. The same may be said of the musical avant-garde, which expresses its tendencies in exclusively technical names, such as atonalism or twelve-tone music, microtonal music or electronic music.

The experimental aspect of avant-garde art is manifested not only in depth, within the limits of a given art form, but also in breadth, in the attempts to enlarge the frontiers of that form or to invade other territories, to the advantage of one or both of the arts. Everyone knows to what extremes symbolism carried the doctrine, already present in romanticism, of the possibility of the cross-translation of sensations: synesthesia, called by Baudelaire "correspondence." Suffice it to cite some of Mallarmé's experiments or a document like "Voyelles," the famous (or infamous) sonnet in which Rimbaud assigned a different chromatic value to each of the vowels, bringing things to the point at which the three letters *e*, *i*, and *o*, as François Coppée's mocking epigram put it, "forment le drapeau tricolore."

Such inquiries had also been preceded by Wagner's experiment with music drama, aspiring, as it did, to a syncretism of the arts. In practice almost all the experiments of this kind were reducible to what was called *Tonfarbe* or *audition colorée*; they aimed at establishing purely phonetic-chromatic relations or at subordinating poetry to music, as did Wagner and the decadents, subordinating the words to the *chanson*. On this account, precisely, there are very many works in modern lyric poetry indicating, in their titles at least, the aspiration to melodic modes, reaching toward "the condition of music." Take, as random examples, Léon Paul Fargue's *Gammes* and Umberto Saba's *Preludio e fughe*. The contrary procedure is analogous: in Claude Debussy, musical description and colorism seem to be leading the music to the condition of poetry or painting.

But later experimentalism wished to or, better, dreamed it could go far beyond that; fundamentally we here have wishful thinking, intentions, programs, pure and simple. Starting from the theory of *typographical emphasis*, dear to Mallarmé in his later phase and to

the futurists, which gave a page of poetry the guise of a poster or a musical score, Apollinaire added to it what he called *visible lyricism*: a graphic-figurative correspondence between the manuscript or printed poem and the sense or imagery of that poem. He was thus repeating, unwittingly, Hellenistic experiments but taking seriously what had in other times been considered a game. In Apollinaire's footsteps, although remaining on the purely theoretical level, Reverdy went so far as to postulate a *plastic lyricism*. And Léon Paul Fargue proclaimed: "To us, ideographic symbols, shaped writing, tasted words, the New Mexico!" To the illusion that the arts were interchangeable and mutually correspondent, there was often united a childish belief that a transformation which was not formal and organic, but external and mechanical, could have a final and absolute value, rather than a merely instrumental and relative one. As an extreme example of such a belief, suffice it to cite the so-called comma poems of the young Philippine-American poet José Garcia Villa, in which the space between each word is occupied by that punctuation mark: a purely arbitrary graphic novelty in which the poet claimed to see a literary equivalent of . . . Seurat's pointillistic paintings!

Avant-garde experimentalism must be observed in its more common and current manifestations, not only in such extreme and absurd extravagances. The former must then be contrasted, on one hand, with the superficial and discrete experiments of the conventional artist and, on the other hand, with that will to style which distinguishes some of the most eminent artists of our period. From the second contrast it will become clear that avant-garde experimentalism is not always a desperate and sleepless search for individual expression (as in Joyce's case) or, even less, for perfect and ideal form (as in Flaubert's). In each of these two writers one has to do with an extreme, modern version of the classical *apprentissage* or mastery. And the fervent, life-long patience with which Flaubert and Joyce (it was Pound who first compared them) sought the ideal of a material that always and everywhere becomes form only through the miracle of style really does seem classical, at least in its reasons

and aims, despite all its heroic or dionysian tension. From this point of view we might even say that an experimentalism aiming solely at novelty can end up sterile and false. Thus the same Valéry, who defined genius in a famous verse as a "long impatience," recognized elsewhere in his writings that "the ideal of the new is contrary to the requirements of form."

What we said about Flaubert and Joyce can perhaps be repeated for Picasso and Stravinsky. They, like many of the greatest avant-garde artists, do not limit their experiments to the avant-garde itself, but in their anxious search for a new and modern classicism often work with the taste, style, and even the mannerisms of neo- and pseudo-classical forms. The experimentalism of such artists is a kind of aesthetic Faustianism, a search for Eldorado and the fountain of youth, for the philosopher's stone in the sphere of artistic creation. Fundamentally, the least important avant-gardism is that which limits itself to transmitting the material of art or renewing its language, even if such is the most frequent and typical. In certain arts, especially music (think of Schoenberg and his followers), avant-gardism seems to exhaust itself almost completely in technical-stylistic metamorphoses. If in the best cases the experiment does become an authentic experience (in the most profound sense of the word), all too often, in the more literal-minded and narrow avant-garde, it remains merely an experiment.

Experimentalism so conceived is at once a stepping stone to something else and is gratuitous; if one looks closely it is, when not harmful, useless or extraneous to art itself. But socially it is a very interesting fact, since it tends not so much to form the artist as to transform the public, that is, to educate it. From such a point of view, the whole avant-garde functions like the theatrical variation of it which is appropriately called *experimental theater*—a theater that in fact aspires to educate the author and actor of tomorrow through the process of educating the spectator of today. Avant-garde theater, chiefly aiming to educate the spectator, thus shifts from private to public experimentation. There are those who believe that the primary end of avant-garde literature lies precisely in thus being not a display

case or salesroom but a free, or at least an open, laboratory. The publisher James Laughlin expressed this view, in the preface to his third anthology of "exceptional" writers (1938), when he declared that his own publishing house, New Directions, intended "to print the best work of a certain kind—the best *experimental* writing" and was "not a salesroom but a testing ground . . . a laboratory for the reader as well as the writer." This conception is one of the splendid commonplaces of avant-gardism, as shown by the fact that Eugene Jolas attributed the same function to the famous journal he edited. In the introduction to an anthology of the then defunct *transition* he retrospectively defined that review, using nearly identical words, as "a proving ground of the new literature, a laboratory for poetic experiment."

"Laboratory" and "proving ground"—these are phrases suggested by the scientific and industrial technology of our time, and it would perhaps be wrong to regard them as metaphors, pure and simple. They reveal above all a concept of artistic practice which differs radically from the classical, traditional, and academic one. The laboratory and the proving ground doubtless serve to train the artist: that is, they aim toward his perfection as an artist; this is profoundly different from the goal of a school, which is the perfection of the school itself. The laboratory and proving ground serve, in the second place (perhaps it is really the first place), an even higher aim: the technical and scientific progress of art itself. It is indeed precisely the use of such images which suggest the ideal of the avant-garde artist as an obscure artisan who consecrates his own life and work to the future triumph of art. The images, in brief, help us to recognize both the kinship between experimentalism and the activist, agonistic, and futurist tendencies and the relations that bind avant-garde culture to modern praxis.

Experimentalism so conceived basically results in the contradiction or negation of the purely aesthetic end of the work of art. And although the avant-garde cannot renounce the experimental moment, which it indeed glorifies to an extreme, it has often felt a need to confess the paradox and to resolve the equivocation. Perhaps it was an awareness of such an ambiguity which dictated as a subtitle of

transition, "an international quarterly for creative experiment." In nobly aspiring to an impossible synthesis (creation *and* experimentation), the coiners of this phrase perhaps wished to assert the coincidence in aesthetic-psychic time of the moment of experimentation and the moment of creation. In reality, experiment precedes creation; creation annuls and absorbs experimentation within itself. Experiment fuses into creation, not creation into experiment. The negated alternative, even though it is considered by many avant-garde theoreticians as the ideal situation, is an inadmissible hypothesis. Creation resolves experiment, or transcends it: the experimentation that is not, as such, annulled tends to remain not only *ante-* but *anti-*creation.

Scientificism

We have already stated, and examples like rational architecture further suggest, that the avant-garde's experimental nature is not essentially or exclusively a matter of art; this circumstance separates it from the formalistic searches of traditional art and from many modern currents as well. What Pareto called the "instinct for combinations" in fact leads the modern artist to go beyond art forms and to experiment with factors extraneous to art itself. The experimentalism of some avant-gardes, especially some of the more recent—surrealism, for example—is largely a matter of content, that is, psychological. The issue is not so much experiment in the technical or stylistic realm as experiment in the *terra incognita* of the unconscious, the unexplored areas of the soul. In this regard, suffice it to cite the influence of psychiatry and the doctrines of some of Freud's rivals on the subject matter of art, especially important in surrealist poetry but also in painting. Sometimes, as in futurism, what occurs is nothing but vulgar experimentalism, formless and imitative, which works with the raw material of art, introducing mechanical ingredients (the cuebars or noisemakers in Russolo's futurist theater) or really foreign bodies (the more ingenuous collages, false moustaches or real eyeglasses on statues or portraits).

Such excesses once again reveal the eccentricity and infantilism

we have already defined—but here they play games with technical elements. Now, the cult of technique is certainly not exclusively modern; it may even seem characteristically classical. But what often triumphs in avant-garde art is not so much technique as “technicism,” the latter defined as the reduction of even the nontechnical to the category of technique. “Technicism” means that the technical genius invades spiritual realms where technique has no *raison d'être*. As such it belongs not only to avant-garde art, but to all modern culture or pseudo-culture. It is not against the technical or the machine that the spirit justly revolts; it is against this reduction of nonmaterial values to the brute categories of the mechanical and technical.

Such a consideration resolves the problem of the links between contemporary culture in general, avant-garde art in particular, and science (or, better, applied science, popularly confused with science-without-adjectives). We must elsewhere speak of the relation to science in terms of theory, from a different and higher viewpoint. The avant-garde thinker or artist is, at any rate, particularly susceptible to the scientific myth, as a few examples can easily show. The prestige of the myth is aptly reflected in Rimbaud's aesthetic formula, “the alchemy of the word,” as it is in the formula, dear to Ortega y Gasset, “the algebra of the word.” The titles of numberless works of our day are scientific metaphors: Corrado Govoni's *Poesie elettriche*; Blaise Cendrars' *Poésies élastiques*; Max Jacob's *Cornet à dés*, *Cornet à piston*, *Laboratoire central*; Tristan Tzara's *Coeur à gaz*; André Breton's *Vases communicants*; the *Camps magnétiques* of Breton and Philippe Soupault; or the pseudo-mathematical formula with which Ardengo Soffici baptized one of his first books, *Bif & zf + 18* (the Florentine printers read it as “Bizzateffe” so as to be able to pronounce it). The avant-garde predilection for arithmetical titles, inspired by a bizarre numerology, is analogous: the *150,000,000* of Vladimir Mayakovsky (here, however, the number refers to the future population of Soviet Russia); or the cipher *291,391* which Picabia chose as a title for a surrealist periodical. Perhaps these are *bizarrierie*; we must not forget, however, that in some cases the mania they seem to express did try to make itself a method and system, giving birth, for example, to the folly René Ghil called *scientific poetry*.

These and other examples show that the mechanical-scientific myth is one of the most significant ideological components of our civilization and culture. It is neatly caricatured by the Russian Evgeni Zamyatin in his utopian novel *We*, when he imagines a distant posterity considering the timetable or general directory of the railroad as the unequaled and supreme masterpiece bequeathed them by this century. Zamyatin's irony gains in eloquence when one remembers that he was an engineer by profession and lived in that revolutionary Russia where, at the time the book was written, constructivism flourished. This poetic movement, in purposeful harmony with so-called socialist edification, tried to inaugurate a technical-structural functionalism in the word-arts. On the other hand, the irony of the American customs office was involuntary when it refused to consider Brancusi's functional *Bird in Flight* as a work of art, but taxed it with the import duty for manufactured metals.

Avant-garde scientificism remains a significant phenomenon even when one realizes that only a purely allegorical and emblematic use of the expression “scientific” is involved. Besides, this symbolic use is made possible by a view of the world that reduces all powers and faculties, even spiritual ones, to the lowest common denominator of the scientific concept of energy. This means that avant-garde scientificism is the particular expression not only of the cult of technique, but also of that general dynamism which is one of the idols of modern culture and was elaborated into a cosmic myth by romantic philosophers. And perhaps it was as an unconscious reminiscence of the metaphysical-scientific mythology of the German romantics that Jean Cocteau defined poetry as an “electricity,” a definition dictated by the idea of a double dynamism, physiological and physical.

Sometimes avant-garde scientificism is the naive and simple cult of the miracle, prodigy, and portent. Many moderns look at science almost with the eyes of savages or children, and reduce it to magic. Evident enough are the connections between Massimo Bontempelli's aesthetic doctrine, so-called *magic realism*, and his sympathy for modern life, the city and the machine. Children treat

machines as monstrous toys; thus the modern artist breaks the machine-toys of art to see what makes them go. Precisely on this account avant-garde experimentalism sometimes takes on the character of a gratuitous act, producing strange discoveries by the game of chance. Following the primitive's example, the modern man or artist sometimes seems to consider the machine not only as a source of energy but also as the fount of life, an end rather than a means, and thus treats the machine itself as more valuable than anything it produces.

Humorism

This machine cult, along with similar cults, maintains an ambiguous and equivocal relation between art and science at the heart of modern culture. The artist who momentarily lets himself be seduced by the quasi-magic scientific Faustianism of modern genius becomes abruptly conscious of how easily in a society like ours science gets fatally vulgarized and thereby, distantly but directly, produces much of the ugliness of contemporary existence, above all, the mass culture that the avant-garde opposes. The naiveté of modern man can only be relative—hence the alternating phases of enthusiasm and irony with which he faces modern civilization. The irony shows itself in mocking and grotesque forms and stems from a tension that seems perfectly to fit Bergson's definition of the comic as a contrast between free human vitality and the automatic rigidity of the machine. But often avant-garde irony is called forth by a sense of how empty are the miracles that science seems to promise. In such cases the irony can become pathetic and tragic, focusing not only on the way the machine fails man, but also on the way man fails the machine. Thus avant-garde art can be transformed into a criticism of modern life and a protest against man-the-machine. Such was certainly one of the aims of German expressionism; in fact, Lothar Schreier defined it as "the spiritual movement of an epoch which put inner experience above external life." Another expressionist, Hermann Bahr, formulated the crisis that expres-

sionism intended both to embody and to resolve as follows: "Reduced to a pure means, man has become the tool of his own work, which has been senseless since it began to serve nothing but the machine. And that robbed man of his soul. Now he wants it back. That's what is at stake." From this point of view the expressionists, perhaps better than other avant-garde artists, understood the impasse in our culture which Alfred North Whitehead so lucidly formulated in his *Science in the Modern World*: "In regard to the aesthetic needs of civilised society the reactions of science have so far been unfortunate. Its materialistic basis has directed attention to *things* as opposed to *values* . . . It may be that civilisation will never recover from the bad climate which enveloped the introduction of machinery."

Expressionism, despite its lucid consciousness of the problem, was too exacerbated and paroxysmal to resolve it or even to put it in suitable terms. The consciously or unconsciously humorous formulation of the problem seems much more easy and felicitous, although gratuitous and minor. One of the peculiar or dominant forms of antiscientific humorism is *black humor* or, to use an epithet dear to André Breton, *black bile*. Breton preferred to define this species with the arbitrary term of *umor* (without the initial "h") to underline how new or rare it was, and to separate it from the innocent British humor. This pathetic, grotesque, and absurd type of humorism favored by certain avant-garde currents has an obvious kinship with romantic irony and also with the *spleen* of Baudelaire and the decadents.

A humorism with these ingredients works, above all, on the formal mechanism of modern life which it serves to annihilate or exhaust, following the usual paradox of comedy. Its chief weapons are verbal and formal: hence, to choose examples limited to French avant-garde poetry after the First World War, we have the sympathy for *coq-à-l'âne*, word play, that phonetic caricature which Valéry recognized in Fargue's lyric poetry, and the adoption on a less innocent or more mature level of what the English call *nonsense verse*. Thus, at times that humorism chose art itself as the butt of its jokes,

which explains its inclination to parody and caricature. And this even happens in the less reflective art form of music: for example, in certain of Prokofiev's pastiches and those mocking compositions that Eric Satie produced under titles like *Sonatina burocratica* and *Pieces in the Form of a Pear*.

If parody's typical expedient is inversion, caricature's is perversion; in any case, it is a short step from one to the other. The tendency to fantastic perversion is often visible in the cult of bizarre titles, sometimes signifying nothing, as with the surrealist reviews *Bifur* and *Disc Vert*, sometimes hiding the original meaning in arbitrary or recondite variations, as in the case of the Florentine review *Lacerba*. The series of abstrusely grotesque titles is endless: many of André Breton's, *La Poisson soluble* and *Le Revolver aux cheveux blancs*; Salmon's *Manuscript trouvé dans un chapeau*; Mayakovsky's *Cloud in Trousers*, and so on and on. Even before surrealism proper, Apollinaire wrote what he called a "surrealist drama," *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*. Mayakovsky later composed a drama suggestively titled *Mystery-Buffered*, which remains one of the most bizarre works in the avant-garde theater, along with Marinetti's *Re Baldoria* and, first and foremost of all, Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, with its famous reiteration of a slightly varied phonetic equivalent of what we call "a four-letter word" and the French, the "mot de Cambroune."

A special form of avant-garde humorism is surely the attitude called *fumisterie*, after Laforgue's *Pierrot fumiste*. That attitude is of course present even in more conventional poetic currents, such as *poesia crepuscolare* and *fantaisiste*. Fumism is merely a species of infantile cerebralism and is obviously related to another attitude, *funambulism*. The Parnassian Banville was probably following in the footsteps of Baudelaire's well-known prose poem, picturing the artist as acrobat, when he invented the myth of the wirewalking artist in the first of his *Odes funambulesques*. The myth caught on quickly and later was melded into variants of the white-face clown and the fall guy. Certainly it inspired Picasso's harlequins, dictated the fifth of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, and finally created the Chaplin-Charlot legend. Palazzeschi had already summed up these same motifs in one of his infantile and buffooning pieces of art prose,

which assigned to the artist the task of being "the *saltimbanque* of his own soul." The motif was destined to become popular, so much so that two writers as traditional as Thomas Mann and Leonid Andreyev made it into the type of the artist-actor or buffoon, "he who gets slapped." But the two principal variants remain the most meaningful: the allegory of artist-acrobat suggests the tendency to dehumanize the human and to mechanize the vital; the allegory of the artist-Pagliaccio emphasizes his destined humiliation and alienation.

Nominalistic proof

It now only remains for us to consider avant-garde criticism, aesthetics, and historical position in reference to modern art as a whole. We have arrived at the place to stop and sum up what has been said so far; as at the beginning of our inquiry, I shall use the verbal concepts of avant-garde and movement as an organizing device. These verbal concepts are simple postulates from which a complete series of corollaries was deduced, and we shall now use them, by the same semantic method, to demonstrate the concrete reality of the tendencies thus far described abstractly.

From the quantitative and qualitative point of view (from statistical frequency and the degree of theoretical-practical influence), the first and most important category of terms is the one underlining the moment of antagonism, without necessarily distinguishing between antagonism to the public and antagonism to tradition. Sufficient as examples would be the Independents, the *fauves*, and the Secessionists; or, with a different emphasis, decadence and futurism. These are all names which also allude to alienation in its social-economic, cultural-stylistic, and historical-ethical variants. Anti-traditionalism and modernolatry are not so much secondary names as the categorical imperatives of the futurist movement, which possessed in its name the most successful and suggestive formula thought up by the avant-garde—a paradox, though a meaningful one, inasmuch as the movement was one of the lowliest and most vulgar manifestations of avant-garde culture.

This category is followed by the one naming the tendency or moment of agonism: the Russian acmeism (from the Greek *acme*); verticalism, postulated by some of the *transition* collaborators; Hispano-American ultraism; Yugoslav zenithism; the movement organized by the English poet Henry Treece under the banner of the Apocalypse. Beyond all these programmatic names, the agonistic tendency appears clearly in the name of a movement in the plastic arts which briefly flowered in Russia after World War One, self-identified as suprematism.

The class of names underlining the moment of activism has few or no examples, and the general term "movement" already expresses it sufficiently. We might perhaps put vorticism in this class, but that name seems instead to vibrate with an overtone revealing the presence of nihilism.

So far, we have only cited the names of better-known organs and groups. But numerous and frequent are the names of movements which lasted only a day or which boiled down to pure and simple wishful thinking, mere names or programs. Still, it is worth while mentioning them because they are symptomatic, however pretentious and ephemeral they may have been. In an excellent textbook aimed at students of modern French literature in American universities, a compilation of poems and critical writings made by the late Régis Michaud, the author gave a long outline of French avant-garde movements, which rose and fell in a single instant, presumably in the wake of Marinetti's Franco-Italian futurism. I am cheerfully willing to confess that I have seldom heard a single one of these innumerable names spoken, with the one exception of the last on the list, Jules Romain's unanimism. Leaving that one out, here are all the names on Michaud's list: Paroxysme, Synthétisme, Intégralisme, Impulsionisme, Sincérisme, Intensisme, Simultanéisme, Dynamisme. A rapid examination of these merely verbal entities shows the presence of the activist myth in dynamism and impulsionism; while paroxysmism emphasizes agonism and nihilism. Synthesism and integralism seem intended to point to particular aesthetic tendencies, such as syncretism and abstract art. We might

perhaps recognize in simultaneism a variant of historical futurism, or futurism in general, while the labels of intensism and sincerism seem to allude to particular contents or attitudes of a primarily psychological nature.

There are in avant-garde history numerous and ambitious names of a general and synthetic nature, such as naturalism, expressionism, and surrealism, in which the intention is to elevate the term—almost always aesthetic in origin—to a universal concept and philosophical category. But even more frequent are composite names, created by artificial combinations instead of any genuine synthesis, mingling words or notions which are not homogeneous because they belong to differing art forms or differing spiritual categories. Examples in Germany are *die neue Sachlichkeit* (the new objectivity); in Russia, cubofuturism and egofuturism. For obvious reasons, names indicating an experimental tendency in any pure state are rare in literature, although frequent enough in the other arts. Painting counts here with such names as impressionism, divisionism, and pointillism, but the only two literary examples are fundamentally the same: Russian imaginism and Anglo-American imagism. However, there is no lack of names revealing the cult of technique, even in the less empirical arts, such as the already mentioned and long-dead Soviet constructivism. A characteristic sign of the importance that the still living romantic myth of the *Zeitgeist* has for the avant-garde spirit is the name of the Italian movement and review using the historical term "Novecento."

To take up, once again, a distinction formulated at the start of this inquiry, we might perhaps say that, quantitatively, the program names are inferior to the manifesto names. This again indicates that, within avant-garde ideology, psychological and sociological factors prevail over aesthetic factors and over the predilection for publicity-minded and propagandistic positions. From this point of view one can also understand why the stroke of genius which is "futurism" succeeded so well. The one name that succeeded in anything like a comparable way was "cubism," and it is technical and aesthetic in content. Another successful formula was "surrealism," which aimed

at a meaning no less universal than did symbolism, perhaps even more so. The avant-garde also created a rather successful name in the two senseless syllables *da-da*: fair enough, precisely because dadaism expressed, with the greatest possible intensity, the nihilistic impulse. Certainly it is not an exceptional or fortuitous circumstance that these four names are historically and symbolically the most important, just as the four designated movements were not only the showiest but also the most successful of all. In the dialectic of the more recent avant-garde, each of these four movements in fact represents a particular phase or aspect. Dada represents the ethical willfulness of, and for, them all; surrealism, the logical willfulness; futurism, their historical will; cubism, their aesthetic will. According to the terms of Bergsonian philosophy (typical of the avant-garde, in Benda's opinion), the first and second movements symbolize the phase of the *élan vital*, while the remaining two allegorize the category of *durée*. But altogether they suggest, almost without meaning to, the most important variations and the most significant attitudes of the modern state of alienation.

Thus the dialectic of movements is transformed into a system of almost metaphysical relations. Such a system, even though it is only an effect or product, is transmuted in turn to a cause, and then exercises on the culture generating it an influence both formative and deforming. It becomes a dogma and a mystique, transforming avant-garde praxis into principle and doctrine. That dogma and mystique invade even the field of philosophy, conquering the historical and critical disciplines, dominating even the theory and historiography of art and literature. Briefly, those beliefs that initially tend to work as psychic stimuli in the creative area are transformed into theoretical formulas and operate in the critical area as well. These values, which seem destined to remain the object, become the subject, or at least the criterion, of judgment. By way of a small example, suffice it to cite the case of the Russian critical school called *formalism*, which was bound both directly and indirectly to the Russian variants of two important European movements, symbolism and futurism. That school formulated, among other things, a theory

of genres in which the particular variations of a given genre were conceived of as determined by the need to deny the canon and to surpass the norm—in other words, to stand the structure of traditional genres on its head. It is evident that such a doctrine was the direct effect of the transformation of a literary myth into a critical dogma; the consequence of the reduction of certain psychological tendencies of the avant-garde, such as antagonism, nihilism, and agonism, to historiographical norms and abstract principles. One must beware of such a danger; no one knows that better than this author, who has all too often let himself be tempted by the fascination of the game. It is only in the area of rhetoric that the very idea of the avant-garde can come to be treated as a hypostasis.