

Play, Chaos, and Autonomy in the Poetry of Hungarians in Vojvodina (*Új Symposion*)

Roland Orcsik

University of Szeged, Egyetem u. 2, 6722, Szeged, Hungary
rorcsik@gmail.com

The study presents one of the most significant ex-Yugoslav poetry styles after the Second World War—ludism—in the context of Hungarian authors from Vojvodina gathered around the literary magazine Új Symposion (1965–1992, Novi Sad). They were under the pressure of the ambivalent political ideology of SFR Yugoslavia. Hungary has no tradition of ludism, which is one of the significant differences between the poetry of Hungarian poets in Hungary and those in Vojvodina (Serbia) in the period after the Second World War. The study shows the main poetical characteristics of ludism, its South Slavic authors (Tomaž Šalamun, Iztok Geister Plamen, Ivan Slamnig, Branko Maleš, Delimir Rešicki, Vojislav Despotov, Vladimir Kopicl, Vujica Rešin Tucić etc.), and the works of Hungarian “Symposionists” (István Domonkos, Katalin Ladik, Ottó Tolnai, Ottó Fenyvesi). The ludism was accused of blurring the borders between popular culture, subculture, alternative and high culture. The study shows the artistic results of this method (e.g. the poetics of video and collage). The Symposionist authors were accused of being “cosmopolitans”, “anarchists”, “nihilists” and similar by the officials in Vojvodina. The art of Symposionists did not change the political system of Vojvodina during the period of SFRY and after it but it did provide an alternative space for artistic freedom.

Keywords: literature and ideology / Yugoslavia / Yugoslav literatures / Vojvodina / Hungarians / minority culture / experimental art / ludism / *Új Symposion*

The Yugoslav Seal

It is hard to resist the temptation not to think about Yugoslavia and Yugoslav artistic strategies as kinds of play. Of the deep impact of play on culture and poetry, Johan Huizinga wrote in his well-known *Homo ludens* in 1938. He demonstrated the precedence of the concept of play to that of culture through antique examples. It is perhaps compulsory to mention Huizinga’s volume in the first place during

an investigation of the concept of play; Roger Caillois (11–36), on the basis of this work, created the following types of play: *agon* (contest), *alea* (luck), mimicry and *ilinx* (vertigo, ecstasy, chaos). Yugoslavia as a playground contained all of these and also their shared opposite which, according to Huizinga, is not seriousness but an obligation of fulfilling a cultural function.

Huizinga connects the concept of play to freedom/volition: “First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it” (8). If we project these two concepts—i.e. play and freedom—on the various periods of Tito’s Yugoslavia, then we can conclude that they determine its history already since the foundation of the state (29. 11. 1943). On the one hand, one of the two taboos of the regime is expressed in the concept of freedom since the Partisans defined the fight against fascism as “people’s liberation war”. However, the representations of this “people’s liberation war” circumscribed notions of duty and moral responsibility. Freedom thus lacked the irresponsible, useless playfulness. At the same time play is present in the construction of the country if we consider the fight and contest for the foundation of the state¹ which preceded the development of Tito’s Yugoslav culture. Yugoslavia was an ambivalent playground though: its freedom was determined by the supervision and discipline of the dictatorial state apparatus, the basic idea of “brotherhood-unity” was “multiculturalism directed from above” (Losonc 93). Our question is whether and to what extent artistic creation or poetry could have secured autonomy in the contradictory Yugoslav (cultural-)political sphere. To what extent it could have worked as depoliticized play and sign? Or were these politics, rather, exactly a goal for which poetry fought with its poetical means on the Yugoslav cultural battleground?

We cannot evade these questions either when we analyse the cultural role and possibilities of the periodical from Novi Sad called *Ūj Symposion* (*New Symposion*, 1965–1992). According to Beáta Thomka:

Since the journal was launched in the last relatively harmonious period of Yugoslavia it was furnished with the atmosphere of this cheerful, Balkan, Southern, Mediterranean barrack (multilingual environment, playfulness, impulsivity, experimentation, laxity, spontaneity, healthy sense of direction, openness). (133)

¹ Huizinga interprets the foundation and practice of law as parts of play from the perspective of contest (Huizinga 76–88).

The playful aesthetic of the journal is characterized by avant-garde tinkering and collage which proved to be a Yugoslav attribute:

Since the editorial principles and the imaginative graphic design of *Új Szimpozium* were guided by tinkering and collage-like processes it constantly bore the traces of leisure, improvisation, variability, renewing impulses, and together with these the traces of an already gone period. (138)

Various member states competed against each other on multiple issues (*agon*); cultural contest fitted the economic one that resulted in inspiring interactions. Zoltán Virág discovers the Symposionist discourse to be led by the principle of mixture:

The comprehensive utilisation of the experience of *mixtura culturalis* and *mixtura lingualis*, the self-presentation enhancing movement-like characteristics made the need of encountering regional modes of action of simultaneously pertaining to different systems of cultures, to several regions and sub-regions. (19)

However, the interaction as a part of the play of contest was played along the rules given from above. The governmental regulations and prohibitions (1971, 1983) sketched up the ideological borders of the journal's free playground. Nevertheless, Symposionists were not merely passive subjects of the ambivalence of Yugoslavness but also active creators and participants of it. It suffices to consider the number of the journal's published texts which used the catchwords and motifs "Yugoslav" and "Yugoslavia" without any accent of criticism. We must add that they did not act thus merely motivated by constraints of power. To demonstrate this, it is enough to cite the then-contemporary writings and interviews of János Bányai, István Bosnyák, László Végel, or Ottó Tolnai. The once-Symposionist Béla Csorba interprets the self-contradictory nature of the first generation of Symposionists in the following way:

The ideological fog from which some of them have never found a way out evolved from their completely legitimate aversion towards Kádár's Hungary. From this motive they identified freedom with Yugoslavness. You cannot do this, however, without self-mutilation. Definitely not in a communal sense. The emerging possibilities were utilised by government policy: the journal of the first generation thus became at once supported and persecuted by the self-contradictory and complicated Yugoslav system. (Csorba 48)

But Csorba narrows the ideological horizon of the first generation authors, since in his overgeneralizing tendency he ignores the fact that in retrospect some of them treated the question of being Yugoslav if not with complete

rejection, then at least with criticism (e.g. István Domonkos, Katalin Ladik, Végel, Tolnai, Tibor Várady). Furthermore, in the cited interview Csorba does not reflect critically on his own generation and ignores the other fact that *Új Symposion* is inseparable from Yugoslavness, so all editorial generations have been influenced by its ideology to a higher or lesser degree. Also: pertaining to a “nation” is not at all a “natural”, self-evident construct free of any ideology. Nevertheless, there could be no doubt that the interpretation of the concept of “nation”, as well as that of “Yugoslavness”, happened in a way which was directed from above, in spite of the fact that in the columns of *Új Symposion* there were some disputes about Yugoslav Hungarian (literary) identity (cf. Szerbhorváth 225–237). It is an important reflection in Csorba’s interview that points out the ambivalence of Yugoslavness: the contradiction of being at once supported and persecuted defined the cultural strategy of Symposionists. It is without doubt that the texts published in the journal have never questioned the basic idea of Yugoslavness. György Szerbhorváth claims the following about the Yugoslavness of Symposionists: “However they stuck their tongues on Stalinist practices that invade art, they had not had the slightest doubt about the Yugoslav one” (121). Just like Csorba, Szerbhorváth also ignores the fact that Yugoslav cultural policy is not interpretable in a black-and-white way without the notion of ambivalence. Whereas in the Stalinist block a journal like *Új Symposion* had no chance of publication, in Yugoslavia it was possible, and not just because they did not question the idea of Yugoslavness in which they believed. We should not forget, too, that some Symposionists took it to the bitter end resulting in prohibitions and scandals (just like the New Leftist criticism of the Praxis-circle in Zagreb held the government responsible for not representing leftist values).

The question is whether and to what extent aesthetic and poetic procedures might be independent from this Yugoslav cultural political game. The avant-garde, unconventional, anti-authoritarian approach of political themes was always a problem, whether it was about minority ethnic problems (e.g. the much disputed writing of Sándor Rózsa) or about the freedom of artistic creation and criticism (e.g. the writings of Viktória Radics, Ottó Tolnai, Miroslav Mandić, the performances of Katalin Ladik, the poem *Orgia mechanika* by Ottó Fenyvesi, or the activity of János Sziveri).

The play with power’s set of rules was not only formulated along the lines of openly political questions, but also on a poetic-aesthetic level. One of the graphic designers of *Új Symposion*, Ferenc Baráth recalls:

We had no conventional solutions in graphic design. Typography was characterized by chaos, by a mess made up by taste and playfulness. That became our self-imposed profile. The textual content determined visual design of a given issue. Poetry or prose: I adjusted myself to that; the text determined the suitable typography even. (30)

Not counting the issue on pornography, this practice would not have resulted in prohibitions. This does not mean, however, that it has only raised apolitical aesthetic questions nor that it supported the regime's ideology. If we compare it to the self-representative imagery of Tito's regime, then the experimental, unconventional visuals of *Új Symposion* could be regarded as an alternative to the official socialist realism (cf. Dánél; Faragó). The fact that it was realized from state-funded support constituted the paradox. As long as the editorial staff followed the rules defined by the government, no problem occurred.

“Cosmopolitan reservations”

Huizinga interprets poetry not merely as an aesthetic phenomenon:

The first thing we have to do to gain such an understanding is to discard the idea that poetry has only an aesthetic function or can only be explained in terms of aesthetics. ... All antique poetry is at one and the same time ritual, entertainment, artistry, riddle-making, doctrine, persuasion, sorcery, sooth-saying, prophecy, and competition (120).

One of the main traits of poetry is thus play. For Ex-Yugoslav artists play manifested itself as experimentation, spontaneity, unconventional-ity. Symposionists came under the influence of the trend called ludism, elaborated by Slovenian and Croatian poets. It is not merely influence, however, but a playful competition permeating the entire Yugoslavian art scene. Apparently Szerbhorváth is not aware of this dimension and utters a huge misinterpretation when saying: “Symposionists, roughly speaking, were sometimes the imitators of imitators. They wore current Western gears even after Yugoslavians themselves wore them off” (120). For one: “current Western gears” fertilized Hungarian culture in a number of cases, it is enough to recall the story of the turn of the century Hungarian journal *Nyugat* (*West*) and its authors. Catching up with developed Western cultures is a Hungarian issue since the foundation of the state (at that time the ideological background and motivation was Christianity and not the Europe-discourse, yet the process

of Europeanization started there and then). Symposionist authors did not simply imitate Western European and American styles and trends with which they became familiar through a Southern Slavic filter but in a number of cases they created works in par with them in the spirit of Yugoslavian competition. If Szerbhorváth's aim was to analyze the development of Symposionist literature from an educational psychological point of view, then he might have taken into consideration that imitation is not necessarily a negative phenomenon but rather an integral part of the learning and creative process.² During that time Hungary followed a much more closed cultural policy, and the tradition of Vojvodinian literature was not strong and open enough, so it was only natural that the reception of the literatures of Yugoslavian nations provided a path towards the contemporary world literature and art.

Some of the Symposionists broke loose from the confines of provincial minority existence not by negating their minority experience but by re-evaluating it from a wider perspective. They not merely consumed the Western European and American art as a trend but defined it as the horizon and context of their own art. Naturally, not all Symposionist authors were on a same artistic level but the better ones emerged. Otherwise we could not enumerate the Serbian and Hungarian literary prizes of e.g. Katalin Ladik, László Végel or Ottó Tolnai, or the successful reception history in Poland and Western Europe. Surely the international reception was not as widespread as the Hungarian one but still, it is not insignificant. I'd like to add to this that the relevant Hungarian reception of some authors (István Koncz, Pál Böndör) is still lacking, but this problem would take us too far from the purposes of the present paper.

Returning to the trend of ludism: it is questionable when it all started. There is no ludist manifesto as in the case of avant-garde isms. If we take into consideration the claim of Huizinga that play is the basis of poetry, then it is even more difficult to determine the beginnings of ludism. In the case of Yugoslav ludism avant-garde and neo-avant-garde will be the guidelines. The Croatian literary critic Dubravka Oraić differentiated between five types of ludism (99):

1. **semiotic ludism:** the play with the artistic sign. It has two variants:
 - a.) inner: the play with the relation between signifier and signified (e.g. pun)
 - b.) outer: e.g. theatrical performance of a text

² The idea of imitation as a process of learning originates from Plato (cf. the dialogue *Republic*). As for the educational psychological point of view see the essays by Pálffy Katalin Keményné (189–196) and Tamás Vekerdy (133).

2. **metaludism**: play with the play (e.g. the textual play with the word ‘play’ in Khlebnikov’s work)
3. **autoludism**: play with one’s own text (intertextuality with self-quotations)
4. **interludism**: play with various signs (all kinds of intertextualism and inter-medialism)
5. **ontoludism**: play with reality, or the creation of artistic reality

If we take comprehensive look on the history of Yugoslav poetry, we find that all the types mentioned above can be detected in the works of avant-garde authors. The term “ludism”, however, was initially coined by Croatian literary historians to describe the poetry of Ivan Slamnig from the ‘50s. His reception is loaded with the label “play” (Donat 7). Same is true about the poetry of Josip Sever who used Khlebnikovian zaum-plays (Bagić 23–98); he was another Croatian poet of great influence inspiring the development and orgy of ‘70s and ‘80s Croatian ludist poetry, especially among authors of the journal *Quorum*. Zvonimir Mrkonjić defines ludism (in relation with lettrism) as “a play with structures of sounds, the creation of sound formations or sonic neologisms from the dissolutions of the conventional forms of words. According to a later interpretation of the notion originating from Slovenian poetry, ludism is concerned with the verbal visualization of objective relations following the practice of the OHO group (for example some poems from the volumes *Comets, comets* by Zvonko Maković and *Tekst* by Branko Maleš)” (Mrkonjić s. p.).

All of this points out that ludism that spread after World War II has been a tradition subverted by historical avant-garde and that it has built up its playful poetic constructions from the ruins of conventions. Ludist poems are condensations of semantic chaos: poetic plays with the remnants of semanto- and iconoclasm. Poetic discourse is frequently moved rather by catachresis than by conventional tropic figures. In a number of cases this play can be found in the works of neo-avant-garde conceptualism and lettrism. Ludist poems are not narrative; from the perspective of conventional hermeneutics they seem to be hermetic, inconceivable, nonsensical, discarding reading strategies aimed at understanding. Ludist works are characterized by humor, irony, absurd, grotesque, by non-hierarchical mixtures of cultural registers via intertextual and inter-medial quotations, and by playful subject-destructions. According to the Serbian poet and theoretician Dubravka Đurić:

Radical poets researched the space of the paper sheet, and conceived text as the score of a verbal performance. They look for the possibilities of language using processes they had discovered in other media. They mixed genres creat-

ing multi-genre effects and thus transcended the divisions between different artistic branches. They questioned the bourgeois norms of society, harshly criticized the *l'art pour l'art* principle and elitist aesthetics of poetry. Their artistic activity was provocative pervading of political, ethical and aesthetic questions. (81)

This radical poetic practice relates not only to avant-garde but also to the work “A Throw of the Dice...” (1897) by the symbolist Mallarmé. According to its Hungarian translator Gyula Tellér this poem is untranslatable but this quality makes it paradoxically spellbinding:

Finally, there is a sound material of language, the key sentence's alexandrine imbalanced with a thirteenth syllable modelling accidentality, thousands and thousands possibilities of playing with sound, rhythm and tone. Hardly or not translatable language-bound singularities. ... “Blanks” between the articulate sentences or clauses are intensively bound to the linguistic material, they organize the lines and associations of thought, now slowing, then accelerating, enhancing, distancing via symmetric positing, now opposing, then linking. They behave like the content-organizing categories of a visual syntax. Mallarmé has found a new form, a third possibility besides free verse and prose verse that tried to overcome the outbreathed alexandrine: the visual poem that enlists typography and the containing visual field among its formal poetic elements (54–55).

“A Throw of the Dice...” is the first realization of “pure poetry” as defined by Mallarmé's disciple Paul Valéry. When Ottó Tolnai refers to “pure poetry”, that is his source.

It is not by chance either that one of the defining figures of Vojvodinian Serbian poetry, performance and postpunk, Slobodan Tišma turned to the enigmatic masterpiece of Mallarmé in a number of occasions. The poem by Slobodan Tišma titled “Vrt kao to” (1977) refers to “A Throw of the Dice...” (the motif of dice/cube recurs in several earlier poems of the author which can also be linked to Kazimir Malevich's black square). According to Miško Šuvaković:

The poem of the late sixties is still a symbolic body dragged out by Tišma from the vortex of the modernist questions concerning the boundaries of language (for Mallarmé it is the sound of the accidental language searching for its own tone, for Rilke it is the discrete tone of the inner sound of time and space, for Wittgenstein these are the questions about language and its beyond which language grabs then drops). (96)

In the case of the poem “Vrt kao to” (“Garden as it is”) Tišma is concerned with decomposing, preventing, problematizing the linguistic subject. For him it can be traced back to Mallarmé’s “A Throw of the Dice...”.

Backgrounds differ elsewhere. In the Slovenian member state, the first “concrete poems” by Aleš Kermauner, Franci Zagoričnik and Tomaž Šalamun were published in 1965 in the university journal *Tribuna* based on the avant-garde constructivist tradition (the koneses of Srečko Kosovel). Soon the poetic, artistic and performance group OHO was founded (Franci Zagoričnik, Iztok Geister Plamen, Marko Pogačnik, Matjaž Hanžek, Milenko Matanović and Vojin Kovač-Chubby) that turned out to be a source of inspiration also for Croatian and Serbian authors and artists, too (in Vojvodinian context: the groups KÔD, E), Januar, Februar, Bosch+Bosch and others were founded inspired by the Slovenian initiative).³ According to the Croatian literary historian Branimir Bošnjak, radical experimentation with language and visual imagery was realized in its most consequent form in the Slovenian scene (160). Slovenian theoretician Taras Kemauner labelled these experiments reism (6–7). Dubravka Đurić coined the term “cosmopolitan reservation” for neo-avant-garde Yugoslav artistic phenomena: “It is not the revision and re-actualization of the avant-garde between the World Wars but rather an authentic existentialist answer for the ideological, cultural and artistic requirements of the fifties and sixties” (91).

When we look at the experimentation of Symposionist poetry with ludism, reism, conceptualism, lettrism, it turns out that it didn’t merely have aesthetic aspects but also social-political and existential risks. Symposionists first reckoned with the “frog-” and “church tower-” perspective of Vojvodinian Hungarian poetry. Then came the ambivalent play with the Vojvodinian state apparatus. In this way, the ludist chaos-forms of Symposionist poetry constituted an experiment, an attempt at creating a personal autonomy of political and existential scale.

Nikola Dedić claims that this radical experimentation is an attribute of “neo-avant-garde textualism” (595–602). Serbian reception does not differentiate between “neo-avant-garde textualism” and “Vojvodinian textualism” (Šuvaković) on a national/ethnic basis. However, due to the language barrier, they know and mention only those Yugoslav authors whose works have been translated to either Serbian or Croatian. Šuvaković uses the epithet “Vojvodinian” since as opposed to the fragmented, critical “Vojvodinian textualism”, the criticism and poetry

³ About the ludism of the Slovenian group OHO see Igor Zabel’s essay “Uloga igre u delu OHO” (355–362).

in Belgrade were more conventional, with verism, that is, with narrative types of poetry coming into the fore. Bálint Szombathy (91–100) defines the antecedents of “neo-avant-garde textualism” and conceptualism as the verbo-voco-visual poetry in Serbian tradition (authors surrounding the zenithist and surrealist Dragan Aleksić and Ljubomir Micić). The notion of “textualism” might be extended to Symposionist poetry, too, and then we can talk about “Symposionist textualism” and linguistic-visual fireworks (which in the case of Katalin Ladik was enriched by phonic experiments).

Old news?

In the nineties ludism did not fascinate young Slovenian, Croatian and Serbian poets much. The play of poetry was not exhausted, however, only its means of expression have been transformed. In Hungarian relations ludism appeared more or less idiosyncratically only in the individual poetics of some Symposionist authors. There is no such thing as pure ludist Symposionist poetry. There exist as many ludisms as many Southern Slavic poets used or use it in their poetics. Ludism is rather a principle, a parasitic poetics than an autonomous ism with a clear manifesto. In accordance with neo-avant-garde, ludism pluralized the space of literature.

Poetic experiments do not permeate the deep layers of society. They remain on the margins of conventions. This means that freedom resulting from poetic play is always a marginal, subcultural phenomenon. Social changes might define the playgrounds of poetry, but the other way round is less likely. Avant-garde artistic trends strived for social change, to determine the utopia of the “new” through far leftist or far rightist political movements. The Yugoslav example shows, however, that Symposionist poetry has not changed radically the traditions of Vojvodinian Hungarian politics. Symposionist poetry created an alternative, critical politics – via poetic means. A yet unfinished experiment of the freedom of the “poetically dwelling” man; an experiment and play still waiting for its future experimenting players.

Translated from Hungarian by Zoltán Lengyel

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Igra, kaos in avtonomija v poeziji vojvodinskih Madžarov (*Új Symposion*)

Ključne besede: literatura in ideologija / Jugoslavija / jugoslovanske književnosti / Vojvodina / Madžari / manjšinska kultura / eksperimentalna umetnost / ludizem / *Új Symposion*

Članek predstavi pesniško revijo vojvodinskih Madžarov *Új Symposion* (Novi Sad), v okviru katere se je pod vplivom ambivalentne politične ideologije SFRJ uveljavljala ludizem kot ena najpomembnejših jugoslovanskih pesniških smeri po drugi svetovni vojni. Na Madžarskem ludizem ni obstajal, to pa je tudi bistvena razlika v delovanju madžarskih pesnikov na Madžarskem in v Vojvodini. Avtor opiše najpomembnejše pesniške značilnosti ludizma, njegove južnoslovanske predstavnike (Tomaž Šalamun, Iztok Geister Plamen, Ivan Slamnig, Branko Maleš, Delimir Rešicki, Vojislav Despotov, Vladimir Kopicl, Vujica Rešin Tucić itd.) in dela madžarskih avtorjev (István Domonkos, Katalin Ladik, Ottó Tolnai, Ottó Fenyvesi). Ludizmu so očitali, da briše meje med popularno kulturo, subkulturami, alternativno in visoko kulturo. Članek predstavi rezultate te pesniške metode (poetika videospota, kolaža itd.). Sodelavce revije so uradniki režima v Vojvodini pogosto obtoževali, da so »kozmpoliti«, »anarhisti«, »nihilisti« ipd. Njihova umetnost v obdobju SFRJ sicer ni spremenila političnega sistema v Vojvodini, a je zagotovila alternativen prostor umetniške svobode.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 821.163(497.1).02"1965/1992"

821.511.141(497.1).02"1965/1992«