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A DOUBLE MARGIN: NEO-AVANT-GARDE WOMEN'S WRITING IN THE LITERARY MAGAZINE KRUGOVI (CIRCLES)

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Studying the share of women in the historical avant-garde movements, Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990) supported Marguerite Duras's assessment of the avant-garde women writers as being "doubly intolerable" – since they do not correspond to the usual revolutionary point of view or that of women. Suleiman introduced the concept of the double margin to refer to the problem of critical and historical reception of women's avant-garde writing. Since the procedures of the double marginalisation of women's avant-garde poetics can be observed in different cultural contexts and literary fields, in this paper we will analyse the critical and historical reception of women writers on the Croatian and Yugoslav literary scene who contributed to the literary magazine Krugovi (Circles, 1952–1958) in the 1950s. Although this generation of writers interprets the aspiration of poetry towards a "universal language" (A. Rimbaud) following the avant-garde usages of grammar, figures of speech, and a depoeticised vocabulary, the traditional readings of women's poetics are often based on the expression of women's experience, the mind and body split, and the biographical interpretation. On the other hand, the oeuvres of women from the Krugovi generation call for a revaluation of the relation between their poetic strategies and the possible

gender politics of their poetry. Therefore, we will demonstrate the possibilities of this revaluation by turning to poetical choices, treatment of the lyric subject and the genre in the texts of Vesna Krmpotić, Vesna Parun, and Irena Vrkljan.

Keywords: *gender; neo-avant-garde; Krugovi (Circles, 1952–1958); Vesna Parun; Vesna Krmpotić; Irena Vrkljan*

1. Introduction¹

It's something doubly intolerable, claimed Marguerite Duras in 1974 about the status of her literary work among her contemporaries (Duras 1974: 61, in Rubin Suleiman 1990: 15). While taking the trope of *the double margin* as a starting point for the research into women's part in French surrealism, Susan Rubin Suleiman explained that the double intolerability of the avant-garde women writers² comes from escaping “not one but two sets of expectations/categorizations; it corresponds neither to the ‘usual revolutionary point of view’ nor to the ‘woman’s point of view’” (1990: 15). However, during the 20th century, avant-garde women writers like Duras draw transgressive potentials from this doubly marginalised position in particular literary contexts, and the specific reading of their work's *gender politics* today offers a possibility for a new *estrangement* of the 20th-century literary heritage deeply embedded in experimental modernism and the avant-garde. According to Sascha Bru, if we understand contemporary avant-garde and modernism studies as “the outgrowths of its process in art and literature (and beyond)” (2009: 109), then “perhaps our critical and

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² Having in mind decades of the theoretical debate about the terms *modernism*, *avant-garde*, *neo-avant-garde*, *postmodernism* and others, it is worth citing Suleiman's explanation of the terminology used in the feminist critical approach to some of these phenomena: “The relation that concerns me here is not the one between or among various manifestations of the ‘modern’ [...] but the relation between any or all of these manifestations and women. For my purposes, then, ‘avant-garde’ will designate the whole field – however messy and full of dividing lines it may be – in which modernism, postmodernism, and the historical avant-gardes can be said to occupy a place” (1990: 12). Although we agree with this definition inspired by Poggioli's theory of avant-garde art, we will refer to modernism and the avant-garde in a theoretical framework, as well as to the neo-avant-garde when we discuss the poetics of *Krugovi*.

theoretical energy should go to revising the *process* launched by those early 20th-century avant-gardes” (*ibid.*: 110). However, as the author claims, “this might entail that we first estrange ourselves from the very same avant-gardes which, a century ago, taught us what aesthetic estrangement means” (*ibid.*). Therefore, we aim to demonstrate how working on the doubly marginalised women’s oeuvres within a broader comparative literary framework could become a potential strategy for revising the canon, as well as a site of theoretical and interpretative estrangement.

While necessarily limiting the field of our research, it is our intention to consider this doubly intolerable bond of the *revolutionary* and the *feminine* as described in the central historical avant-garde movements no longer from the point of view of 20th-century European cultural centres but from their peripheries. Thus, we would affirm the valid assumption that “[t]he seemingly ‘belated’ breakthroughs of modernism in off-centre locations can tell us a lot about the history of modernism and the avant-garde, its resurgence in different contexts, the way it is disseminated, translated, adapted, changed” (Eysteinnsson 2009: 34). We will embark on this assignment in the context of the Croatian literary field from the middle of the 20th century onwards. Since the dynamics of this field generally do not represent an exception from the historical and critical masculinisation of modernist and avant-garde literature and art, we will focus on the production and reception of the first generation of Croatian women writers who left a significant mark on the formation of the modernist/avant-garde literary movement. This generation appeared on the post-war Croatian and Yugoslav literary scene in the early 1950s and gathered around the monthly literary magazine *Krugovi* (*Circles/Cycles*), published in Zagreb between 1952 and 1958 as an edition of the *Mladost* (*Youth*) publishing house. As a distinctive phenomenon in Croatian and Yugoslav literature of the time, the magazine reflected on and processed the events in a broader cultural and political context (Detoni Dujmić 1985: 9). Namely, “[i]n the wake of the rift with the USSR in 1948, distinguished and politically influential writers Petar Šegedin and Miroslav Krleža argued (in 1949 and 1952 respectively) for a rejection of Soviet Socialist Realism and the adoption of complete creative autonomy” (Brlek 2007: 85). Therefore, the magazine had “an immense immediate impact on the literary scene by breaking with the previously dominant ideological moulds” (*ibid.*: 84). With its catchphrase “Neka bude živost” (“Let There Be Liveliness”) – which is the title of an opening essay in the first issue of the magazine by Vlatko Pavletić, mem-

ber of the first editorial board – the magazine advocates the autonomy of literary creation from its textual and contextual surroundings and its critical and emancipatory potentials. Although the contributors to the magazine – Krugovaši – were not gathered around a unifying poetics and were much more connected through “generational diversity than similarity” (Detoni Dujmić 1985: 89), their common denominator was a specific “non-reconciling with the repression in literature and art, liberation from the stylistic norms of Socialist Realism and the search for a new poetics” (*ibid.*). Therefore, “[t]he Krugovaši emphatically insisted that semantic relations were established only by the form of the text and could not be ascertained from external evidence; in the act of reading, the mode of referring to a given context took ontological priority over the context itself” (Brlek 2007: 85).

While both the *Krugovi* magazine and its contributors’ literary paths have gained a significant historical and critical reception since the 1960s, we can recognise specific patterns developed in accordance with the critical and historical double marginalisation of women’s avant-garde poetics in the reception of women poets and writers contributing to *Krugovi*. Therefore, our goal is to re-evaluate the poetics of female contributors to the literary movement that developed in *Krugovi*. We will consider their poetics as a genuine approach to poetical, social, and cultural undertakings of the time and simultaneously as part of the counter-discourse developed in the long historical perspective. The aim of this paper is to offer an insight into the women’s poetics as part of the *Krugovi* project, both in terms of the mechanisms of their reception and the relation between specific poetic strategies and the gender politics in their work. On the one hand, we will reveal the avant-garde framework as necessary for understanding this generation and their poetical tasks, and on the other hand, we will show how women’s acts of writing revalue different aspects of aesthetic and social normativity.

2. *The Gender of Modernity in Croatian Literature*

For decades, the affinity of both women writers and readers towards modernist and avant-garde poetics brought to light various problematic aspects of traditional literary criticism and history. This particularly involves their blindness to questions of gender and sexual difference in the dynamics of the modern literary field, not only with respect to women’s but also

men's literary work. If we add a broader – heterogeneous and complex, but historically and critically marginalised – relationship between *women*, the *feminine*, and *modernity* to the problems mentioned in the literary field, the question of the intersection between gender and modernity as manifested not only in literary history and criticism, but also in the modernist and avant-garde literature itself, must become the starting point for any further research on the women's participation in the modernist and (neo-)avant-garde literary and artistic movements. As Rita Felski demonstrated in one of the ground-breaking studies focused on the problem entitled *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), the historical and critical images of modernity “reveal the inescapable presence and power of gender symbolism” (1995: 1), and “[t]his saturation of cultural texts with metaphors of masculinity and femininity is nowhere more obvious than in the case of the modern” (*ibid.*).

In this sense, one of the prevailing assumptions of the history of literary modernism and the avant-garde is the masculine image of the modern poet or writer, which aligns itself with “a longstanding critical focus” on modernism and the avant-garde as “exclusively male” (Mullin 2006: 138). The paradigmatic figure of a modern artist, and also a revolutionary subject in general, has a symptomatic form: in social and cultural history, this subject appears as “an autonomous male free of familial and communal ties” (Felski 1995: 2). Thus, literary history and criticism also take part in a “long-standing tradition of writing that reads modernity as an Oedipal revolt against the tyranny of authority, drawing on metaphors of contestation and struggle grounded in an ideal of competitive masculinity” (*ibid.*). However, as Felski explains, the presumed sex/gender of the modern artistic subject deeply affects “not just the factual content of historical knowledge – what is included and what gets left out – but also the philosophical assumptions underlying our interpretations of the nature and meaning of social processes” (*ibid.*: 1). Then, what difference does this reading of modernity as a *masculine* or *feminine* artistic phenomenon make? What are the consequences of the sexual/gendered signifier in the readings of modernist and avant-garde poetics and oeuvres, women's and men's alike? And how can we make these questions pertinent in the context of the Croatian and Yugoslav literary field from the middle of the 20th century onwards? How can we make them relevant today?

On the one hand, the masculine image and lineage of modernity in general enabled the critical and historical perception of modernism and the avant-garde not only as relatively separated from the upheaval of the “first

wave” feminism (Mullin 2006.: 137) in the historical sense, but also completely detached from the questions and problems of sex and gender at the level of methodological and interpretative choices. This is the case both in European and Anglo-American modernist traditions, which differ in the assessment of the modernist art’s “integral connection to social change” (Felski 1995: 23) in the first context, and the dissolution of this relation in favour of the basic opposition between modernism and “sociopolitical concerns” (*ibid.*) in the second context. Furthermore, because of the presumed masculinity of literary modernity, various historical and critical approaches not only overlooked the significance of women’s modernist and avant-garde literary work, but also lost sight of the possibilities, meanings, and effects of gender subversion in the works of the acknowledged male writers and representatives of modernist and avant-garde movements. As Bonnie Kime Scott effectively pointed out in the *Introduction* to the literary anthology *The Gender of Modernism*, “both the authors of original manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm a small set of its male participants, who were quoted, anthologized, taught, and consecrated as geniuses. Much of what even these select men had to say about the crisis in gender identification that underlies much of modernist literature was left out or read from a limited perspective” (1990: 2).

However, if we read even the selected modernist and avant-garde literary production through the lens of gender transgression and redefinition of masculinity and femininity, we could notice that “an imaginary identification with the feminine emerged as a key stratagem in the literary avant-garde’s subversion of sexual and textual norms” (Felski 1995: 91). Furthermore, as Felski warns us, “many of the insights about the plasticity and ambiguity of gender identity first explored in the texts of early modernism are currently being deployed, elaborated, and redefined in the turn toward the performative within feminist theory itself” (*ibid.*: 113). Moreover, it is the effect of this primarily modernist crisis manifested through literature that ought to be traced from the perspective of a recent turn to gender performativity, so as to detect the alliance of 20th-century literature with the contemporary projects of sexual and gender emancipation. An increased variety of historical and cultural contexts of research one century after the emergence of modernist and avant-garde literary movements enables us to recognise that “in relation to gender, modernism has a great deal of unassessed vitality in form and content, with its own intricate and varied theory” (*ibid.*: 3). As Felski demonstrates, we can presume a specific

double bond between gender and modernity: “If gender politics played a central role in shaping processes of modernization, these same processes in turn helped to initiate an ongoing refashioning and reimagining of gender” (*ibid.*: 22). Therefore, new associations and previously neglected genres and gender quests, but also new areas of research, could take the central place in this interpretative displacement: “Modernism as caught in the mesh of gender is polyphonic, mobile, interactive, sexually charged; it has wide appeal, constituting a historic shift in parameters” (Kime Scott 1990: 4).

On the other hand, responses of feminist criticism to the gender-unified image of modernism and the avant-garde took various directions: from a critical insight into the masculinist artistic paradigms and traditional literary studies devoted to them, to the new readings of the male canon; from the specific sexual/gendered perspective and discoveries of the immensity and value of women’s works, as well as to theoretical appropriations of modernist and avant-garde poetics into feminist conceptions of language and literature, of which the most heard-of are Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine* and Kristeva’s concept of *la révolution du langage poétique*. In the part of this interpretative and theoretical endeavour that interests us most, “[t]he polysemic nature of modernist art is thus reappropriated for the feminist project through its radical unsettling of the fixity of gender hierarchy” (Felski 1995: 24). However, through the variety of approaches, feminist criticism thus remained more receptive to the possibility that “any attempt to encapsulate women’s distinctive relationships to modernity through a single alternative myth risks becoming a new form of ‘reifying universal’ in its assumption that the history of women can be subsumed and symbolized by a single, all-encompassing image of femininity” (*ibid.*: 7). Since these different feminist critical approaches are often interconnected, Rubin Suleiman calls for a historical approach to specific modernist and avant-garde movements, and to “individual cases in their historical and national specificity” (1990: 18).

If we now examine the context of 20th-century Croatian literature, as one of the possible points of entry into this literary field, we could use the latest anthology of Croatian modern poetry edited by Tomislav Brlek and published in 2022. The anthology includes works of 20th century Croatian poets written in the period marked by two names – Antun Gustav Matoš (1873–1914) and Branko Maleš (1949–). Under the fine-sounding title *Od Matoša do Maleša: antologija moderne poezije* (*From Matoš to Maleš: An Anthology of Modern Poetry*) we can find four women included among

seventeen authors. Three of these women – Vesna Parun, Vesna Krmpotić, and Marija Čudina – were born in the 1920s and 1930s and published in *Krugovi* during the 1950s. Although the first reviews of and comments on the anthology raised the issue of included and excluded poets, and made certain suggestions to expand this selection³, a remark about the predominance of men in this anthology would certainly fail to understand the meaning of poetry and the criteria of selection that constituted the structure of the book. If we follow the editor's conclusions, then we should focus less on the question of what names are included in the anthology and dedicate ourselves to reading the selected texts (Brlek 2022: 632). Since we presume that the general reception will oversee the sexual and gender question as relevant for an edition of this kind, we consider it important to underline that this anthology is more likely to be aligned with a feminist “concern to write gender into modernism” (Kime Scott 1990: 7) than with those who “still find interest only in canonized males” (*ibid.*).

However, this happens in a specific way related to the editor's understanding of *modern poetry*, as explained in the afterword of the collection. In his reflections on poetry, Brlek follows a statement by Jure Kaštelan, one of the Krugovaši poets included in the selection. Kaštelan remarked that “beyond the form, there is no poetic originality or poetic creation or poetic content or theme” (Kaštelan 2004 in Brlek 2022: 620). As Brlek points out, this premise is especially important “in the context of different and persistent endeavours to submit the poetry to any determinant outside of it, moral, political, philosophical, historical, social or cultural” (2022: 620). Furthermore, as a modality of writing, poetry is modern “when it is understood as literarity” (*ibid.*: 621). Therefore, the complementarity of the conception of poetry and writing that constitutes this selection and the poetry of included women could be introduced with the poem *Oslobodi me toga da budem žena* (*Set me Free from Being a Woman*) by Vesna Krmpotić. Following the autoreferential implications of this demand, Brlek's anthology is a rare example of the reception of women in the lineage of modern poetry that does not succumb to the imperative of women's inclusion in the literary canon that leaves their relation to the literary and cultural con-

³ For example, Andrijana Kos-Lajtman writes about non-included poems and names (<https://kritika-hdp.hr/kljuc-modernosti/>; accessed on 22.3.2023), whereas Lujo Parežanin discusses the selection from the perspective of the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav literary field (<https://www.portalnovosti.com/presuceno-hrvatstvo>; accessed on 22.3.2023).

text aside, and therefore avoids the epistemological and methodological problems of such a quest. As we are going to demonstrate, Krmpotić's poem could be read among various strategies of questioning the gender/genre norms in the corpus of women's poetry in modern Croatian literature. However, before we proceed to the analysis of these strategies, we will focus on the poetics of *Krugovi* and the prevailing reception of women's participation in the magazine.

3. *Krugovi*, the Neo-Avant-Garde and Women's Writing

Similar to examples in other European literatures, modernism and the avant-garde in the history of Croatian and Yugoslav literature were mainly attributed to male authors who were eventually elevated to the status of national classics. Their vehement entry into the literary field was mainly perceived in connection with their political orientation (Šicel, 1997: 162) and the symbolic capital of their work, evaluated mainly using universalistic aesthetic principles. The same aestheticism and universalism motivated the reception of a new turning point in the 1950s and 1960s when literary historians called pivotal changes in the Croatian literary field "the second *Moderna* (Modernity)" (1952–1970), analogous to the first one at the turn of the 20th century. Contrary to that, literary critics and theorists interested in poetry as a genre did recognise neo-avant-garde poetics in *Krugovi*, the prominent literary magazine and the beacon of poetic changes, but usually failed to adequately interpret the participation of women. It was generally known that the whole generation of writers was interested in poetry's aspiration towards a "universal language" (Arthur Rimbaud), defamiliarisation of language, grammar, figures of speech and a depoeticised vocabulary. They translated authors and texts that participated in the historical avant-garde movements or explained some elements of activist and agonistic aspects of their own poetical and political claims. The revolutionary aspect of the avant-garde was presented in the works by A. B. Šimić, T. Ujević, Gertrude Stein (translated by Antun Šoljan), T. S. Eliot and László Moholy-Nagy. They were chosen to support the young Krugovaši generation and their arguments against the dominant realistic pattern of writing. Their manifesto, written by the magazine's editor-in-chief Vlatko Pavletić, entitled "Neka bude živost!" ("Let There Be Liveliness!"), set out their poetic programme in 27 points. The first point deliberately attacks the realistic pattern of writing, saying: "Yes, realism, but 20th-century realism.

And Dickens and Balzac belong to the 19th century”. Point 18 adds more to the theme stressing that: “The revolution should also be reflected in the language, in conversations. Nowadays, relationships between people are profoundly changing. Life gets a new content and new forms. Therefore, a new poetic expression is needed as well” (“Revolucija se odražava i na jeziku, u razgovorima. Iz temelja se mijenjaju odnosi među ljudima. Život dobiva nov sadržaj i nove oblike. Znači da je neophodan i nov pjesnički izraz.”) (Pavletić 1970: XX). Discussing prescribed procedures and patterns, they re-established avant-garde features like reflection, citability, installation and repeatability. Their manner could be recognised as revolutionary in their own time, “precisely through its fidelity to its *futures past*” (John Roberts 2010: 726). Their work did not verify the repeatability of the avant-garde and certainly did not imply that the neo-avant-garde should be understood as a mere imitation of former models. For Roberts, “this is not simply a promissory space, or a ‘holding operation’. On the contrary, the avant-garde may be suspensive in these terms, but what now distinguishes it from its historic forebears, and recent neo-avant-garde relations, is that its suspensiveness is a condition of its explicit anticapitalist and oppositional character” (*ibid.*). It is for this reason that he believes that:

the avant-garde today has passed into what we might call a ‘third space’: neither the space of revolutionary transformation as such (the building of a revolutionary culture; the production of ‘thought experiments’ as part of a mobilization of the working class), nor the pragmatic adjustment of critical and radical art to the new postwar administration of modern art (the neo-avant-garde), but the concrete implication of artistic practices in the critique of capital, the state, labor practices, and the official institutions of art. (*ibid.*)

The Krugovaši’s attempt to create artistic practices as a “third space” with social and political implications could be perceived as part of the 1950s and 1960s treatment of the language, tradition, and subjectivity, their heresy which, according to Pavletić (1970: 22), could not be expressed directly at the time:

Therefore, the Young were not allowed to rush head on and write sharp formulations of the programme, but were instructed to make a breakthrough with their works, concrete materialisation of programmatic wishes. A bizarre metaphor or a poem built on the experiences of modern versification was a lesser disturbance to the

proponents of resistance⁴ than resolute programmatic statements. This is the reason why the Young could not reckon so directly with potential representatives of dogmatic views, but managed to create such an atmosphere in which even the preachers of Ždanovist opinions began to write works closer to new aspirations than abandoned old dogmas. In a way, this was the expulsion of the devil which could ensure a positive outcome on condition that the devil not be called his real name!⁵

Affirming a new and modern approach to literature, they escaped institutional coercion to realism, reactivating poetical sources of language. From that perspective, they used poetic modernism as the most pronounced form of artistic engagement. In his meticulous approach to contemporary Croatian poetry, Zvonimir Mrkonjić (1991: 369) finds that their attempt to reveal cracks in the understanding of the language, their attitude towards tradition, subjectivity and collective, and their heresy make them *trans-avant-garde*. As we can see in Pavletić's essay *Pjevanje i govorenje u poeziji* (*Singing and Speaking in Poetry, Krugovi*, 1955, no. 6), their theoretical framework for understanding the literary revolution was based on T. S. Eliot's thought of the harmony of music and the meaning of the word and, likewise, on the idea of a revolution in poetry by returning to ordinary speech. Pavletić is also convinced that the authentic language of poetry is clichéd by long use, and that it, therefore, loses its expressive power, so the new quality of the expressive value lies in the use of spoken language. He believes that the most powerful contribution of the development of modern poetry is the tension emerging between singing and speaking. An additional incentive to this was given by the use of lyrical speaking (narrating) that uses the conversation verse. This

⁴ He refers to the official dogmatic resistance to the Young Krugovaši and their radical aims.

⁵ "Mladi se zato nisu smjeli frontalno zaletjeti i pisati oštre formulacije programa, nego su bili upućeni da se probijaju djelima, konkretnim ostvarenjima programatskih htijenja. Jedna bizarna metafora ili pjesma građena na iskustvima moderne verzifikacije manje je smetala nosioce otpora nego programatski rezolutne izjave; zato se mladi i nisu toliko direktno mogli obračunavati s eventualnim zastupnicima dogmatskih shvaćanja, koliko su svojim djelima uspijevali stvoriti takvu atmosferu u kojoj su čak i sami propovjednici ždanovističkih mišljenja počeli pisati djela bliža novim težnjama nego napuštenim starim dogmama. Bila je to u neku ruku akcija istjerivanja vruga pod jednim uvjetom za njezin pozitivan ishod: da se vrag ne nazove pravim imenom!"

strand of development later prevailed in contemporary Croatian poetry and has its sources in the tradition started by their free verses by S. S. Kranjčević, J. Polić Kamov, A. B. Šimić, Vlaisavljević, Kozarčanin and Tadijanović. Pavletić also found important traces of Whitman, Eliot and Anglo-American Imaginists (*ibid.*).

Although critics and historians like Cvjetko Milanja (2010: 446) detect several poetical, critical and prose practices in *Krugovi*, including surrealist (Zvonimir Golob, Irena Vrkljan) and linguo-ludistic playful poetry (Ivan Slamnig), he fails to place their work in the context of neo-avant-garde resistance to established linguistic, artistic and social codes. Women authors in *Krugovi*, who for the first time actively and properly participated in some modernist/avant-garde movement in Croatian literature, were appreciated in his more detailed interpretation (*ibid.*: 2000), but mainly as a poetic voice of the specific feminine experience. In this mainly thematic approach, the distinguished collections of poetry *Zore i vihori* (1947) and *Crna maslina* (1955) (*Dawns and Whirlwinds* and *Black Olive*) by Vesna Parun were perceived as a manifestation of feminine pan-naturism or as an expression of the bodily experience of a mature woman (*ibid.*: 46). Admitting that her “sensory sensorial” poetics (senzorno-čulna) manifests itself equally in relation to the world and to the language itself, just like her lyrical voice presents itself driving “a herd of words” (krdo riječi) (*ibid.*: 46), Mrkonjić (2009: 19) likewise connects “the herd of words” with the sensory quality of the poetic perception of the real world and poetic feelings projected into it. Therefore, he concludes: “This poetry of sensory dissolution in the substance of the world is projected as an impulsive credo of words that, with its energy, exceeds the limits of the given forms. The restlessness of the organic being is rooted deeply to the level of a certain deep animism that connects plant, animal and human being with the same striving towards language” (*ibid.*).

Evidently, this analysis reveals some of the vanguard elements like playfulness (Poggioli 1968: 35–36), “ambiguity” and poetic obscurity (*ibid.* 38). Poggioli’s explanation corresponds to Pavletić’s manifesto and to the generational poetic practices. “Poetic obscurity”, according to that, “would then aim at creating a treasure trove of new meanings within the poverty of common language, a game of multiple, diverse, and opposing meanings” (*ibid.*). As “naturally equivocal”, poetry results in ambiguity and “the paradoxical derivation of a rather traditional linguistic rationalism” (*ibid.*).

In spite of this analysis and his commendation of Parun's poem, Mrkonjić (2009: 20)⁶ considers it to be “spontaneous and hardly ‘theoretical’”, and her poetic attitude generally as a reduction of the quantitative world to the intensive one, thus giving a “detailed and responsible quantitative challenge to ‘male’ poetry” (*ibid.*: 21). Seen from the perspective of their critics, approaches by women writers in *Krugovi* differ by corporeality vs. intellectualism in their poetry: Vesna Krmpotić, who is “more intellectual than Parun” (*ibid.*: 62), introduces an element “that brings the subject into a stronger relationship with his environment”; delineating his limits “in other beings and things”; “acquiring destiny in others” (*ibid.*: 61). Opposite to her, Irena Vrkljan (who with her husband Zvonimir Golob, who was at the time more prominent, belongs to Lorkian surrealism) was represented as the author who forms “the bodily resonance of a surreal verse” (*ibid.*: 98). Likewise, Milanja (2000: 173) notes: “It has already been noticed that I. Vrkljan is more focused on physicality, and how, quite understandably, she builds a surrealist strategy from this and is in terms of a motive ‘scheme’ and ‘performance’ closer to Freud.”

It seems that Mrkonjić is the creator of the idea about the physicality of women writers. He criticises Vrkljan for her writing that is too clear and resembles a “committed Prévertism” (Mrkonjić 1971: 119). Mrkonjić believes that Vrkljan's writing is surrealist, but too simple and close to Prévert's poetry, Prévert being a popular writer and therefore no model. Obviously, Jacques Prévert and Federico García Lorca are two sides of a seesaw that turned out to be inevitable when discussing these authors. Milanja, on the other hand, keeps complaining about Vrkljan's “Freudianism”⁷ (2000:

⁶ Mrkonjić (2009: 20) praises the poem *I am Chasing the Herd of Words (Ja tjeram krdo riječi)* as “one of the first, if not the very first, coherently expressed poetics of our post-war poetry”.

⁷ In contrast, Branimir Donat (1993: 197) rejects an analysis that would examine “Freudianism” in the surrealist poetry of Irena Vrkljan and Zvonimir Golob. At this point he is more interested in “the obsession with rhetorical questions, the power of the poetic exclamation, the fever of metaphorisation with which they attempt to portray an emotional charge, the forest of hidden meanings that the poet conveys through his work”. In her poetry, Donat pursues the idea of a “linguistic, psychological and moral liberation” (*ibid.*). Donat formulates his analysis as a critique of the difference between attempt and realisation of surrealist poetics, in which he recognises sign of equality “between creation and provocation”. (*ibid.*: 199). At the same time, he allows the assumption “that Irena Vrkljan has begun to write poems in which reality is not rendered through the use of concrete language, but in which poetic language creates the imaginary in language.” We underline this observation as significant for our interpretation of poetry in this and the previous article (Protrka Štimec, Dakić 2019).

173, 174), her surrealist archetypes, proclaiming her to be a poet of “existential-analytics” (*ibid.*: 174). He has already recognised her collection *U koži moje sestre* (*In My Sister's Shoes*, 1982) as autobiographical, similar to her famous novel *Svila, škare* (*Silk, Scissors*, 1984) (*ibid.*: 175). Like Mrkonjić, he is not enthusiastic about her poetry:

Vrkljan often addresses social problems from recent history (*Our Worker's Letter Home*), whose basis is the subject's non-identity place accompanied by interference in communication. In such an environment, the poet is more concerned about the epistemological-ontological than with the aesthetic status of the poem, wondering about its possible content and possible meaning (*Gledam fotografiju pjesme* [*I am Looking at the Photograph of a Poem*], *Autoportret* [*Self-Portrait*]), which undoubtedly proves that, with the basic idea of her poetry, she belongs to the circle of Krugovaši. As it is obvious and confirmed by her collection *Veče poezije* [*An Evening of Poetry*], even in her most surrealist beginning, Vrkljan did not, like Golob, possess “a voice that echoes in the corridors”. On the contrary, she possessed “a room, that terrible garden”, which means that despite “her similar” metaphors, she isolated herself with metonymies of closedness, solitude, a walled-in and closed space that manifested itself more and more in images of the memory, and less and less in images of the (open) world, which was increasingly seen in the interiorising forms of mediation. Therefore, “in the end” the acceptance of “death, my sister”, is the acceptance of the final thing, forced more by despair and hopelessness than by transcendence – a truly Krugovian consequential end. (*ibid.*: 175–176)

A justified connection between some poetry collections of Irena Vrkljan and her novel, which due to its “gender-coded” themes and expressions became synonymous with *women's writing* in Croatian literature, should be viewed through the use and treatment of language, and not through subjective, “autobiographically determined” elements (Milanja 2000: 175). Ingrid Šafranek (1983: 19, 22) already pointed to the interdependence of poetic and political effects of women's writing and the avant-garde. According to Andrea Zlatar (2004: 13), Irena Vrkljan's narration, faced with the impassable threshold of expression, “retreats and gives way anew to the poetic language of images and lyrical expressions, feelings extracted from the continuity of narrative experience”. Thereby – according to Cixous – she positions poetry as the ultimate

manifestation of *écriture féminine*⁸ (1976: 879–880). Self-referentiality and the multidimensional treatment and use of language and writing in Irena Vrkljan's poetry and prose show that the context of her writing significantly exceeds civic, biographical referentiality. In the context of *Krugovi* poetics, as pointed out by Sanjin Sorel (2016: 170), she is “the first poetess who poetically announces distancing oneself from intimate and impressionist lyricism with emphasised psychologism based on different discourses of suffering”. Also, the panorama of *Četrdesetorica* (*Forty Men*, 1955), which provides an overview of young Croatian lyrics reveals that the poetic expression of Vesna Krmpotić, Irena Vrkljan, Vesna Parun and Anka Petričević is completely open to “poetic modernism”. They reinvented avant-garde interventions using surrealist poetics and procedures (Vrkljan), tested and questioned the dominant linguistic and political consensuses (Krmpotić) and shed light on things in the hegemonic matrix that are denied or passed over in silence (Parun). Following these insights, in the last part of the paper we will consider a number of indicative examples from their oeuvres to see how the relation between the specific poetic strategies and the possible gender politics of their poetic work resists the problematised interpretative procedures and aligns itself with the emancipatory potentials of neo-avant-garde poetics, thus offering a critical perspective grounded in the doubly marginalised position of the women's (neo-)avant-garde(s).

4. Transgressing the Gender/Genre

Instead of joining the traditional readings of the women's poetry from the Krugovaši generation – with the prevailing notions of the expression of women's experience, mind and body split, and the biographical interpreta-

⁸ In Vrkljan's novel *Silk, Scissors*, the language is a theme and a means of expression, “writing becomes an ethically burdened mechanism for dealing with the past, reducing fear of it, re-signifying existing ideas, establishing closeness and making up for what has been lost, preserving memories that would be lost if overcome by ineffability, asking questions and searching for possible answers. Mass and formlessness are connected with the reserve of language, experience and emotionality, so the ‘torture of upbringing’ in civil rooms and bloody history are reflected and dissolved in the language and between languages. At the same time, writing/language as a kind of refuge and reflection is transformed from a subversive use of one's own linguistic competence (resistance to discipline), through the preservation and production of memories to a modality for working through trauma.” (Protrka Štimec, Dakić 2019: 253).

tion – we will emphasise specific poetic strategies that draw the reader's attention to the formative force of the poetic voice and thus resist and escape the procedures of critical and historical enclosure. Although these procedures are not synonymous, a major part of the reception of women's poetry has one thing in common, namely the "dominant presumption about the lyric poem as an intimist speech, which is formed around the idea of a homogeneous lyric subject" (Milanko 2022: 8). In the field of literary studies this idea corresponds to "the widely accepted understanding of lyrics as an expression of the poet's emotional life" (Kravar 2022: 36) and the reconstruction of the poet's "worldview" (*ibid.*: 37). While Zoran Kravar deploys a philosophical perspective on this issue, he explains that the "subjectness of the subject is necessarily grounded in a universal image of the essence of human nature, whether this image has body, soul or spirit as its origin" (*ibid.*: 33). Analogous to the idea of a homogeneous lyric subject is the assumption about homogeneity and coherence of the poem itself, which sets aside its constitutive contradictions, together with the tropological nature of the poetic language (Milanko 2014: 162).

However, a large part of modernist and avant-garde poetry which was formative for the Krugovaši generation radically challenged this idea of the subject – as a key element of a traditional and bourgeois conception of literature and art. At the core of Krugovaši's conception of literature was a constitutive literary split: as Andrea Milanko reminds us, "to read a poem primarily means to accept the split between the author and the lyric subject established in a poem on the one hand and the break between the context of its creation and its content [...] on the other hand" (2022: 9). Therefore, the most influential currents of contemporary literary theory – Russian Formalism, New Criticism, the Prague and Tartu schools, structuralists – "repeatedly proved the methodological necessity to separate the author's biography from the lyric voice" (*ibid.*). In a broader sense, this is related to the constitutive necessity of modern literature and poetry: "to be readable, a poem must abandon its determination of what it wants to speak about" (Brelk 2022: 625).

One of the specificities of Croatian neo-avant-garde women's poetry is that it relates the discussion on the status of the lyric subject to the issue of gender. However, contrary to the biographical and psychological approaches to this phenomenon, gender is not a previously known answer/solution of the poem in the major part of women's poetry, but one of the questions posed in poetic construction. If we take another look at the already men-

tioned poem by Vesna Krmpotić – *Oslobodi me toga da budem žena* (*Set me Free from Being a Woman*) – we could read its demand as programmatic not only for the anthology of modern women's poetry, but for the broader poetic corpus as its source. Developing this demand from the rhetoric figure of the apostrophe in the first strophe, the lyric subject addresses the absent addressee with a wish to adopt an uncertain, genderless form – counting not only on the line which divides feminine from masculine, but also human and non-human: “da makar na tren budem nešto drugo / što imena ni lika nema” (“to be at least for a moment something else / that has no name or figure”)⁹ (Krmpotić 2022b: 436). On the one hand, the apostrophe constitutively brings the addressee to life, and on the other it is up to the reader to give a face (*prosopon poiein*) to the poetic voice. While Krmpotić's poem draws attention to the significance of gender in the process of anthropomorphisation of the lyric voice, to become (a woman) becomes a sign of the other's manliness (“Ti ne znaš kako tamno neću da budem žena, / ta značka – ma koliko dragocjena – / značka za tvoju muškost”) (“You don't know how darkly I don't want to be a woman, / that badge – however precious it might be – the badge for your masculinity”) (*ibid.*). Following De Man's work on the rhetorical figures of apostrophe and prosopopoeia, Milanko reminds us that “if the anthropomorphisation gives us a temporary comfort, it does so at the expense of an imprisonment in a certain ideology” (2014: 171). However, this possibility is radically destabilised by the figure of the apostrophe that presents the demand in Krmpotić's poem. The apostrophe, the moment in which the poetic voice pronounces: “O!”, as Culler noticed in his famous text, is the constitutive figure of poetry: “Apostrophe is not the representation of an event; if it works, it produces a fictive, discursive event” (2001: 169). Therefore, the poem does not represent a previous event (experience, biography, face), it produces itself as an event. When the lyric voice asks “Set me Free from Being a Woman”, it asks to be heard for what it is: *something else*. Finally, if we can read this poem as programmatic for a broader corpus of women's poetry, we could turn to the specific poetic strategies that resist the “masculine” reader's eye/I. From the rich production of the influential poets of the Krugovaši generation (Vesna Parun, Vesna Krmpotić, and Irena Vrkljan) – we will select a number

⁹ The translations of verses included in this article are mostly made by Lidija Mesić Šimunić for the sole purpose of rendering the content of the poetry and should not be considered official translations of the poetry.

of examples that provide an opportunity to read once more their poetry in terms of its potential *gender/genre politics*.¹⁰

One of the conventional poetic strategies of playing with gender in the corpus we have in mind is the distinctive use of a cross-gendered verse: a verse in which the gender of a lyric subject differs from the gender of the author of the poem. While this phenomenon in the Croatian literary field was recognised and described in the oeuvres of early Petrarchan poetry, primarily as a convention of a female voice used by male authors¹¹, as well as in Croatian modernist and postmodernist drama – as an identification of the author with a female protagonist¹², the cross-gendering as a specific feature in modern Croatian poetry still calls for an appropriate kind of attention. It is, therefore, necessary to demonstrate how primarily poetically “the crossing of gendered voice also disrupts the dualism of male and female subjectivities, creating tensions, ambiguities and double meanings that indicate the significance of slippage, hybridity, and uncertainty” (Kim 2012: 4). As Rina Kim, one of the editors of the collection *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices*, validly assumes while drawing on Butler’s notion of gender

¹⁰ The use of genre in Irena Vrkljan’s texts is evident in the way she uses poetry and prose, which is visible, among other things, in the relationship between narrative procedures in the novel and the poetry collections that preceded it. Furthermore, “a kind of po/ethics of women’s writing in the novel *Silk, the Scissors* is visible in the way it operates with genre and identity conventions by simultaneously using and refuting what it establishes: the writing of ‘women’s lives’, the autobiography. The oscillations visible at the beginning between the referential and the poetic/self-referential, and the abandonment of a linear narrative line in which ‘stopping halfway means the same as going to the end’ (Vrkljan, 1984, 12), result in the chain of traumatic personal, family and general history – as well as gender histories (history of women’s lives) – being dissolved in the redemptive density of language, play and creativity.” More in Protrka Štimec, Dakić, 2019: 251–253.

¹¹ Tomislav Bogdan (2002) examines cross-gendered poems by early Croatian Petrarchan poets in the context of Italian literary influences on Croatian poetry in the 15th and 16th centuries. He reads them as texts that contradict feminist critical argument about silencing women in Petrarchan poetry (2002: 119), and as texts that subvert the conventions of Petrarchan poetry itself, especially its predominant images of women (*ibid.*). However, Bogdan reads the function of the woman’s voice as “a projection of masculine desire in the speech of the Petrarchan lady and conceptualisation of love as universal desire” (*ibid.*).

¹² Čale Feldman 2001, where the author uses Paglia’s notion of *sexual metathesis* in the interpretation of the selected modernist and postmodernist dramas (by Ivo Vojnović, Ranko Marinković, Marijan Matković, Slobodan Šnajder, Pavao Pavličić, and Boris Senker), as well as to situate its own reading within the broader context of the 20th-century Croatian literary field.

performativity, “the voicing of the gendered Other [...] unsettles the ideas of stability and coherence that underpin social and sexual norms and challenges the very notion of a (that is singular) gendered identity” (*ibid.*). Therefore, what seems to be “a simple rhetorical move” (Parker and Willhardt 1996: 1) brings forth a series of complex questions not only about literary and cultural institutions with their conventions of production and reception, but also about the formative, transgressive nature of the artistic and poetic act itself.

Although the poem *Zavedena (Seduced)* by Antun Branko Šimić, one of the most important precursors of *Krugovi*, pioneers cross-gendering in Croatian modern poetry, we find this practice already in the early poetics of women poets. Vesna Parun uses one of the strategies that resist the dominant biographical reading founded on the idea of the homogeneous lyric subject. In her collection *Zore i vihori (Dawns and Whirlwinds, 1947)*, she also uses a male voice and a plural lyric subject. However, the opening poem of the collection and Parun’s part in Brlek’s anthology entitled *Bila sam dječak (I Was a Boy)* plays with these conventions by introducing the gender into the chain of transformations and keeping the female lyric voice: “Bila sam zrno rumena grožđa / u zubima sred poljubaca; / lisica utekla iz gvožđa; / dječak, što praćkom poklike baca; // i ujed pjesme nasred čela; / šarena mačka u košari igre. / Što nisam bila, što nisam smjela, / zrcalo ribe u zjenici vidre!” (“I was a red grapes berry / in the mouth amid the kisses; / a fox escaped from an iron trap; / a boy shooting shouts with a catapult; // and the bite of a poem on the forehead; a tabby in a basket of games. / What I was not, What I dared not, / a fish mirrored in the pupil of the otter!”) (Parun 2022: 280). The agrammatical transformation in the title becomes part of a sequence of metaphors that in three cross-rhymed quatrains includes masculine, feminine and neutral, mixing human with animals, fruits and itself (poem), up to the unspeakable (“što nisam bila”; “What I was not”) and even surrealist (“zrcalo ribe u zjenici vidre”; “a fish mirrored in the pupil of the otter”). If we acknowledge that this chain enters the poem as the content of a dream, it is hard to set aside the formal and figurative structure in which it finds itself before the reader. Since this poem introduces the author’s first collection, we could again assume a certain programmatic significance of the text. Therefore, it is a serious mistake to connect (more or less directly) the “I” that leads the “herd of words” of Parun’s poetics with the assumptions about the biographical author or women’s poetry in general, that enclose it within a circle of body, eroticism,

and love – which are all catchwords of a rather masculine view on women's poetry. Furthermore, if we turn to Krmpotić, another representative, and her poem *Oslobodi me toga da budem žena* (*Set me Free from Being a Woman*), we can recognise the plural lyric subject as a distinctive strategy of the author's poetry. We can also comprehend this strategy in continuation with the author's strong tendency to deal with the status of the lyric subject even in the poems written in the first person. One of her poetically most impressive examples is her anthological poem *Nit od niske* (*A Thread of a Necklace*): "ja, koja sam samo jedno, / ono što je ja, i žedno / jedino sebe nedoglednog; / ja pristadoh biti drugo, // i tisuć puta istim krugom / rasuti se, skupiti se, zaboraviti, sjetiti se" ("I, who I am just one, / that which is I, and thirsty / only oneself unseeable; / I agreed to be other, // and a thousand times along the same circle / to scatter oneself, to collect oneself, to forget, to remember") (Krmpotić 2022a: 449–450). The dissolution of the "I" in the other is further enforced with paired rhyme, alliterations, assonances, and wordplay. A selection of Krmpotić's poetry entitled *Niska* (*A Necklace*) after the poem previously mentioned includes numerous poems with plural lyric subjects. While most of them are anonymous, among the ones named are paradoxically poets – *Pjesnici*: "Nitko nas ne razumije / i nitko nam prijatelj nije. / Samo nam rekoše ići / gdje riječ ne može stići. // Samo nam rekoše prijeći / rijeku zvjezdane mliječi, / na splavi od krhkih riječi. / I vratiti se, i reći" ("Nobody understands us / and nobody is our friend. / They just told us to go / where the word cannot reach. // They just told us to cross / the river of a starry way, / on a raft of fragile words. / And return, and say") (Krmpotić 1989: 112). The poetic collectivity and the conception of poetry aligned with it echoes in many other Krmpotić's autoreferential poems, such as *Mjerenje i vaga* (*Measuring and Scales*) ("Zar ti nisam teška, dragi? Odloži na čas vagu / i uzmi me golim rukama, / neka nas slobodno njiše talas krasnog nesuglasja, / talas koji nas je stvorio") ("Am I not heavy for you, dear? Lay the scales aside for a moment / and take me with your bare hands, / let a wave of wonderful discord freely swings us, / the wave that created us") (*ibid.*: 18), *Unutrašnja pjesma* (*Inner Poem*) ("a u tišini svačije klijeti / vino i vatra, mliječ i glazba / vlastitim riječima pjevaju vazda / pjesmu koju nitko ne sazda") ("and in the silence of everybody's wine hut / wine and fire, jelly and music / sing forever with their own words / a song that nobody composed") (*ibid.*: 88), and an homage to A. B. Šimić – *Pjesma o otpalom pucetu* (*A Poem to a Fallen Button*): "Ono je siročje smisla / pa neka ga pjesma mazi" ("It is an orphan of meaning / let the poem caress it") (*ibid.*: 117).

The selected examples of women's writing that participate in the generational transformation of aesthetic and social codes underline the importance of the relation between formal strategies and questioning of the gendered lyric subject in the revaluation and understanding of its emancipatory potentials. The neo-avant-garde entry of Krugovaši into the literary field marked a multiple turn towards revolution, which, as Vlatko Pavletić pointed out, should have been carried out "sotto voce", within genre changes and not by a noisy manifesto. These changes are also visible at the formal level, changes within the genre itself, for example in poetic choices (Krpmotić, Parun), but also in trans-genre uses and repurposing of poetry and prose (Vrkljan).

5. Conclusion

The 20th-century Croatian literary field is not an exception to the general *double marginalisation* of avant-garde women's poetics within critical and historical accounts, which still mostly maintain the masculine image of the modernist and avant-garde poet. This affects their final representation of the literary periods. However, as we attempted to demonstrate, (neo-) avant-garde women's poetics could be one of the potential starting points for a revaluation of the central historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements. In the analysis of the reception of women's poetics that appeared in *Krugovi*, the most influential Croatian literary magazine of the 1950s that adopted the autonomy of literary creation as its artistic *credo*, we noticed that the prevailing treatment of women's oeuvres is based on a traditional set of presumptions about women's literary production in general: the idea of the representation of women's – especially bodily – experience, the mind and body split manifested between or inside the selected oeuvres and the biographical interpretative choice. On the one hand, however, these presumptions can be recognised in a broader comparative framework and, on the other, they can be questioned from the perspective of the literary material they try to comprehend. As we demonstrated, to understand the generation of *Krugovi* and their poetical tasks, including the inevitable women's participation in the project, the framework of their avant-garde influences is necessary and it calls for a revaluation of the women's poetics developed along the magazine's editions, especially their reappropriation of avant-garde poetic strategies to make gender visible as a relevant problem in the literary field. In this

sense, women's poetry in the 1950s and 1960s aligns itself with the primarily modern crisis in gender identification, which is still at the core of feminist theoretical engagement. The selected examples of the use of rhetoric figures, gender metathesis, and transformations from poetry to prose in the poetics of Vesna Parun, Vesna Krmpotić and Irena Vrkljan show that the possible gender politics of their work could be based primarily on the formal strategies of their texts, thus constitutively relating that which seems unrelatable for a large part of literary history and criticism: the avant-garde and gender. In this sense, the traditional "bodily experience" could only be replaced by the experience of the "textual body" and the constitutive uncertainty of its various readings.

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SAŽETAK

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DVOSTRUKA MARGINA: NEOAVANGARDNO ŽENSKO PISANJE U ČASOPISU KRUGOVI

Istražujući udio žena u historijskim avangardnim pokretima, Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990) slijedila je procjenu Marguerite Duras prema kojoj su avangardne spisateljice u književnom polju “dvostruko nepodnošljive” – s obzirom na to da ne odgovaraju ni uobičajenoj revolucionarnoj ni ženskog perspektivi. Suleiman pritom uvodi koncept *dvostruke margine* kako bi uputila na probleme kritičke i povijesne recepcije avangardne ženske produkcije. Budući da procedure dvostruke marginalizacije možemo pratiti u različitim kulturnim kontekstima i književnim poljima, u radu analiziramo kritičku i povijesnu recepciju pjesnikinja čija je pojava na hrvatskoj i jugoslavenskoj književnoj sceni povezana s časopisom *Krugovi* (1952–1958). Iako je krugovaška generacija pronalazila uzor u avangardi, tradicionalna čitanja njezinih ženskih poetika nerijetko su se temeljila na ideji o izražavanju ženskog iskustva, rascjepu uma i tijela te biografskoj interpretaciji. S druge strane, ženski opusi krugovaške generacije zahtijevaju novo čitanje veze između njihovih specifičnih pjesničkih postupaka i rodne politike njihove poezije. Potencijalno polazište ovakva čitanja prepoznajemo prije svega u poetskim izborima, tretmanu lirskog subjekta i žanra u tekstovima Vesne Krmpotić, Vesne Parun i Irene Vrkljan.

ključne riječi: *rod; neoavangarda; Krugovi; Vesna Parun; Vesna Krmpotić; Irena Vrkljan*