

Oponentský posudek

David Vichnar, “The Avant-Postman: James Joyce, the Avant-Garde and Postmodernism” (Doctoral Dissertation)

David Vichnar’s dissertation is a truly magisterial opus, both in terms of scope and ambition, and of execution. It examines the legacy of techniques pioneered by James Joyce in British, U.S. and French experimental writing in the period between World War II and the present day, and hardly misses a single important innovative author in these literatures. It is marked by a clarity of style and argument, together with a special gift for a felicitous shortcut, whereby the candidate manages to poignantly discuss what is often an extensive oeuvre in the space of a mere few pages.

Vichnar bases his argument on Renato Poggioli’s influential definition of the avant-garde, developing it in terms of the “Joycean avant-garde” as promoted by Eugène Jolas in his magazine *transition*. Vichnar argues that Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* “launch a series of effects for which the post-war (neo-)avant-garde functions as a type of ‘documentary organ’”. These include the idea of language as a set of material traces disseminated in the text, writing as a parodic subversion of existing discourses and styles, and a treatment of words as “machines generating polyvocal ever-shifting conglomerates of meanings” (p. 7). The body of the dissertation subsequently discusses the variegated developments of the above strategies by several dozen prominent experimental authors.

Vichnar’s approach argues against the acceptance of the dichotomy between “modernism” and “postmodernism”, and also opposes the notion of the latter having replaced the former in terms of genealogy. In fact, Vichnar’s writing implicitly embraces Christine Brooke-Rose’s verdict to the effect that “modern” and “postmodern” are “self-cancelling”, “lazy” and “inadequate” terms (cf. p. 45). Such an attitude is well justified by the nuanced reading of the works and authors selected for discussion in the dissertation, apart from being generally laudable. The ultimate merging of the “avant-” and the “post-” is similarly forceful and justified; however, an objection may be raised in lieu of this as regards the chronological structure of the dissertation. Nonetheless, the explanation provided in the conclusion may be considered as satisfactory, i.e. any of the alternative arrangements listed would most likely be in the way of lucidity, and would present its

own pitfalls. As it is, Vichnar's work comes across as an extremely accomplished study in literary history which argues for circumspection as regards the customary categorization of material.

The submitted text may be regarded as a solid basis for a first-class scholarly monograph. The following list of comments is thus intended primarily for the author's consideration when preparing the text for publication in book form:

1. More consideration is due to the work of Samuel Beckett. Beckett can clearly be conceptualized as another "avant-postman", which is perhaps beyond the scope and concerns of Vichnar's study. However, a number of the writers discussed by Vichnar are evidently at least as close to Beckett as they are to Joyce in terms of the style and techniques that would be typical of them. Brooke-Rose is perhaps the most glaring example, even as far as the passages discussed in Vichnar's dissertation are concerned: notwithstanding the stylistic affinity to Beckett's prose, there are several prominent allusions to Beckett which Vichnar bypasses (e.g. the opening of *Amalgamemnon* paraphrases the opening of *Malone Dies*, the quote from *Textermination* on p. 51 features an obvious reference to the closing lines of *The Unnamable*, etc.). This does not need to affect the general argument concerning Joyce's pioneering role (after all, even the mature and late Beckett may legitimately be regarded as an inheritor of Joyce); nonetheless, a mention of Beckett as perhaps a step between Joyce and the more recent writer in question would be apposite, wherever relevant.
2. The introduction to the section on the French *nouveau roman* should discuss – at least briefly – the reception of Beckett's Trilogy among the French authors, based on whatever empirical evidence there is. Given the dates of publication of the Trilogy, its pioneering brand of metafictionality is hard to ignore as a precedent for authors of the *nouveau roman* other than just Robert Pinget (who was a friend of Beckett and knew his work, a fact that is appropriately discussed by Vichnar).
3. While the importance of the republication of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and the appearance of *The Third Policeman* are duly noted, a few more lines are perhaps due to the influence of particularly *At Swim* on subsequent authors of metafiction in English.
4. The section dedicated to U.S. authors most appropriately notes the seminal impact of Borges and Nabokov in America and thus avoids overstating the direct influence of Joyce. What should be added in this respect perhaps is a consideration of the impact of Gertrude Stein's experimental fiction.

5. Finally, more attention should be paid to copy editing. Not only is the submitted text rife with minor editorial oversights, but the Introduction regrettably includes the same complex sentence twice on the one page (p. 5), while parts of the Conclusion repeat passages from earlier sections almost verbatim.

As indicated above, these remarks are meant as suggestions for a future development of what is otherwise an exceptional work of astute criticism.

I recommend the dissertation for defence. / Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.

Praha, 30 December 2013

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