

Louis Armand, PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:

re David Vichnar, "The Avant-Postman: James Joyce, The Avant-Garde and Postmodernism"
(Doctoral Dissertation)

In his essay "The Novel and the Experience of Limits," Philippe Sollers writes: "LET'S ADMIT IT—the novel has become the subject for polite conversation." In his critique of the normalisation of literary modernity, Sollers invokes the Trinitarian gospel of Proust, Joyce, Kafka in whose wake the contemporary novel is deemed to have inherited the task of the diligent churchman: "Dialectical necessity," he writes, "would have the new novelists *complete* what was present in germ in these three authors whose revolutionary genius everyone agrees to recognise. Other names may be summoned in support; nevertheless, what matters is to know how to isolate a linear evolution that makes the advances associated with these three names a guarantee for the elevation of the contemporary novelist—an elevation that, despite a few temporary obstacles, is quickly displayed in the by now infallible museum of cultural values." Sollers's rebuke is of course not directed at Proust, Joyce, Kafka but rather the industry in cultural prestige that speaks in their names, an industry in which terms like "avant-garde" have likewise come to be invested as signifiers without meaning—which by some "dialectical" impetus convey the idea of an experiment *by way of the conservation of a status quo*. "Avant-garde," as Sollers notes, "already contains the word *garde*. Strange combat, strange complicity."

And so we have Mr Vichnar's dissertation in which this strange combat is dissected. The tendency to suppose a linear evolution of the novel is no less apparent in the industry of James Joyce studies than elsewhere—indeed, it is perhaps more so. "Joyceans" have a tendency towards a type of messianism, echoed among lesser mortals. The future of the novel "after Joyce" is either dogma or apostasy. There are of course the familiar figures of the last supper, the church fathers, Beckett for example. But their self-appointed priesthoods are like Blake's angel and make for dreary reading. These are the self-fanciers of a pseudo-avant-garde that dwells among the pages of the *TLS* and the *New York Review of Books*. They purvey future paths of the novel in their own image. They acquire literary prizes. Like Martin Amis, they indulge from time to time in the Freudian sport of *Götterdämmerung*, the better to resurrect these proprietary deities—Proust, Joyce, Kafka.

When David Hayman in 1977 proposed an issue of *TriQuarterly* magazine on “The wake of the *Wake*,” he approached the business at hand with a degree of scepticism. The question was not one of documenting a field of influences, but to identify a future of the novel beyond the “afterlife” of Joyce. That is to say, beyond that definitive end to experimentation supposedly signalled by the publication of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, as was frequently proclaimed. And beyond the death of that primitive idol, too, set up in place of the man, James Joyce, to which the “novel” was henceforth expected to pay lip service—as for example in the work of Anthony Burgess, who succeeded very well at it. It is not the business of the contemporary experimentalist to do away with the Father, but rather that entire cultural edifice erected in the Father’s name. The Church of Joyce.

But if Sollers’s complaint reminds us of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, it is not an invitation to nostalgia (the resurrection of a more authentic, “historical” avant-garde—warming the old corpses). To suppose that all “experimental” fiction in the wake of the *Wake* is merely a kind of “neo” would be to accede to the judgement of literary undertakers, whose accommodations of the *irony* of “avant-gardism” in the first place seem always without humour. Hence the necessity of a certain *impiety*. Were Mr Vichnar’s dissertation merely an exercise in “Joycean” scholarship projecting its self-image onto the “future of the novel,” or in literary accountancy, it would be worthless. Vichnar’s underlying project is far more, and implies the contradiction of that “polite conversation” that passes for literary criticism nowadays, which ordinarily has the good manners never to enquire too deeply of the revolutionary elephant taking up room beside the drinks cabinet.

As both critic and publisher, Mr Vichnar’s interest has been directed by a vital element in the work of Joyce that infuses (is infused by) a spirit of experimentation. Experimentation in the proper sense of the word—not as affect but as existential necessity: the condition, as Dewey might’ve said, of *experience*. As it did for the late Donald Theall, Joyce’s writing signals here a particular “ecology of sense”—articulating not simply a communicative repertoire but an unreserved potentiality for symbolic action. What Theall called “the Joyce Era” extends, for Vichnar, beyond a temporal placement, to encompass an experimental temper. “Joycean” not in any *formal* sense, but in the intuitive praxis of the “revolution of the word.” Which is, of course, the sense in which we must re-learn to read Joyce, also, if we are not to become or remain one of those slavish imitators of a critical stance.

As in Sollers’s, a polemic resides at the heart of Mr Vichnar’s project. As much as it represents a “compendious” recuperation of the frequently marginalised

writing of the last seventy years, it disavows the logic of the paradigm that would make of this a “linear evolution,” or even an “anti-canon.” (To make love to a monument is as ridiculous as arguing with one.) To varying degrees, these writers are *contemporaries* of Joyce. Or rather, theirs is a *contemporary* writing. Not of a “Joycean” metaphysic (the so-called postmodern as capitalist/metaphysical masterstroke, *per* Fukuyama), but of a materiality in language (cf. Vichnar’s three axioms: “trace,” “forgery,” “idiom”). That this is a fraught enterprise attests to the difficulty of the task. Not Vichnar’s task so much as that of his writers who have for so long stumbled about, as it were, in a type of posthumous wilderness. It is instructive always to be reminded of the many ways in which *Ulysses* and especially *Finnegans Wake* were great “failures” before the priests at our literary Sinai contrived to render them into stone. Even in their stridently avowed differences, like Beckett, like Wyndham Lewis, these inhabitants of the wilderness stake a claim to a failure that laughs as much as it denounces (it is not a magisterial laughter). The institutional “avant-garde” has never quite known what to do with them.

I hereby recommend this dissertation for defence.

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