

Minutes

From the doctoral defence of Mr. David Vichnar,

Held on 20th January 2014 at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

Title of the dissertation: "The Avant-Postman: James Joyce, the Avant-garde and Postmodernism."

Present: Prof. PhDr. Martin Hilský, CSc (chair of the committee), Louis Armand, PhD. (Charles University supervisor), Prof. Jean Bessière (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle supervisor), Mgr. David Vichnar (candidate), Prof. Micéala Symington (Université de La Rochelle opponent), doc. Ondřej Pilný, PhD (Charles University opponent), Prof. Joanny Moulin (Aix Marseille Université opponent), Magdaléna Potočňáková, PhD. (University of West Bohemia opponent), members of the public, Bc. Olga Peková (recording secretary).

The chair of the committee, professor Hilský, welcomed all present and thanked them for their coming to the defence which would be conducted under a "cotutelle" arrangement. He introduced the members of the committee and invited the supervisors to introduce the candidate.

The Charles University supervisor, doctor Armand, introduced the candidate and summarized the progress of his PhD studies and his excellent academic achievements.

The Université Sorbonne Nouvelle supervisor, professor Bessière, summarized the progress of the thesis writing and highlighted the pleasant relations with the Charles University supervisor.

The chair thanked both supervisors and invited the candidate to present his dissertation.

The candidate acquainted all present with the content of his dissertation. He said its goal was to map the development of post-war writing in the wake of James Joyce's "revolution of the word," consisting in exploration of the materiality of language. The thematic framework had been provided by the Parisian *Transition* magazine, which serialized and promoted Joyce's *Work in Progress* as part of the "Revolution of Language" proclaimed by Eugene Jolas.

The genealogy was structured chronologically and centred around three key strategies: concrete writing; writing as plagiarism, forgery and parodic subversion; and writing as subversion of the signifier by means of neologism, punning, multilingualism and portmanteau. "Innovative writing" had been conceptualized based on Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, i.e. as a reaction against the flat, prosaic diction of public speech and against the degeneration of common language through conventional habits.

Positing the centrality of Joyce for literature of the post-war period had paradoxically proven a challenge to most conceptualisations that consider post-modernism a replacement of, or a successor to, modernism. Lyotard's concept of post-modern position as a nascent state of modernism and a creation *post modo*, that is, outside the pre-established rules and familiar categories, had turned out more useful. Periodizations such as Ihab Hassan's or Brian McHale's had shown insufficient. Similarly, the authors treated in the dissertation had been sceptical to the pertinence or usefulness of applying the label "post-modern" to their work.

The thesis was organized around three nodal points: in the UK, it was the circle around B. S. Johnson (Anthony Burgess, Christine Brooke-Rose, Ann Quinn, Brigid Brophy), later followed by Alisdair Gray, Iain Sinclair, Steven Hall and David Mitchell. In the US, the lineage started with William Burroughs and continued through the authors of “metafictional impulse” (John Barth, William Gass, Donald Barthelme) and Raymond Federman’s group “Surfiction” to Ronald Sukenick, Gilbert Sorrentino, Kenneth Goldsmith and Mark Danielewski. In France, the *nouveaux romanciers* (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor) as well as the father of *Oulipo*, Raymond Queneau, took Joyce for the cornerstone of their anti-canon, which tendency extended to Philippe Sollers’s *Tel Quel* magazine. The earlier-mentioned three key strategies were found to roughly correspond to these three geographical areas.

The thesis deployed a chronological ordering, although the archive would allow for other arrangements, such as ordering along the lines of concrete writing (Johnson, Gass, Butor, Gray, Federman, Roche); plagiarism and parody (Burroughs, Brooke-Rose, Acker, Goldsmith, Queneau, Perec); and the subversion of the signifier (Burgess, Brophy, Barthelme, Sorrentino, Pinget, Sollers, Cixous) respectively. The archive was understood as a field of influences, where influence stood for an active transformation rather than passive imitation, with many cross-national ties. On the whole, the thesis covered some forty-four writers active over a period of sixty years. The candidate concluded the presentation saying that the genealogy implicitly contained other arrangements and thus invited further critical attention and elaboration on the connections between the “avant” and the “post.”

The chair thanked the candidate for his clear-stated presentation and invited the opponents to present their assessment and questions.

The Université de La Rochelle opponent, professor Symington, thanked both supervisors for inviting her to join the committee. The opponent characterized the dissertation as impressive both in terms of its scope and quality of writing. She singled out two main theses implicit in the work: first, tracing the post-Joycean genealogies in British, American and French literature; second, a redefinition of what constitutes Joycean avant-garde, an important contribution in her view.

She appraised the first thesis as roundly managed and based on precise readings of authors who had been judiciously chosen, especially highlighting the pages on Burgess. She appreciated the candidate had brought to the fore unjustly neglected authors such as Ann Quinn, which was more the case with the British than the French writers. The method had necessarily limited the space devoted to individual writers and sometimes may have led to value judgements, for example when the candidate states the vast majority of Burgess’s writing failed to live up to the project. Nevertheless, the extraordinary literary intelligence at work went beyond the scope of a doctoral thesis and especially the section on Gray showed particular merit, although it could have included a discussion of *Poor Things*.

The opponent said the definition of Joycean avant-garde deserved attention in its own right, as the topic of the materiality of language touched upon the question of structural avant-garde and the book object. This could have been presented more explicitly in the discussion of Quinn and Brophy where the circularity of structure at once firmly fixed in the physical book, as in *Finnegans Wake*, could have been emphasized more. She noted the organization of the work also made each reader ask why particular authors had (not) been included. She realized the lack of “usual suspects” such as Flann O’Brien was a consequence of the national

delimitation, but that in turn raised the question why Irish literature (Joseph O'Connor, Maggie O'Farrell, etc.), had not been included. Additionally, the fact that Joyce had escaped national categories questioned the pertinence of returning to them. However, all this did not detract from either the quality of the dissertation, or the candidate's deep understanding of Joyce.

The chair thanked the opponent for her appreciation and remarks and asked the Charles University opponent, docent Pilný, to present his feedback.

The Charles University opponent thanked the chair. He emphasized this was a most accomplished thesis, both in terms of its scope, length and coverage of the territory, which alone would have perhaps made including Irish literature impracticable. According to him the readings demonstrated sensitivity and a gift for felicitous shortcut, while still doing justice to the complex material, a quality rare in any established critic. He considered the work a solid basis for a first-class monograph and his comments would be made with view to that.

The opponent had missed more coverage of Beckett, as some of the more recent authors had referenced him directly; for instance the passages quoted from Brooke-Rose explicitly alluded to Beckett. It deserved to be taken in account that the *nouveaux romanciers*, such as Robert Pongé, had been familiar with Beckett and might have been inspired by the *Trilogy*. Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* would similarly deserve a few paragraphs as an influence on the authors of meta-fiction. Finally, out of curiosity he asked the candidate about his opinion on the influence of Gertrude Stein who had been bypassed in his discussion of the US fiction.

The chair thanked both opponents for their feedback and invited the candidate to answer their questions.

The candidate thanked the opponents for the feedback. He explained the reason for Joycean avant-garde being discussed as internationalist and implicit was that Joyce had been an unorthodox avant-gardist, as he had never become a part of any movement, unlike his *Work In Progress*. He appreciated the mention of neglected writers as this had been one of the driving forces behind the thesis. He expressed his thanks for the mention of Burgess, whom he had again intended to recuperate from the detrimental comparisons to Joyce. Instead of focusing on *Clockwork Orange*, whose application of Babelian strategy to Russian and English in his view departed from, not trivialized, Joyce, he had decided to analyze *Napoleon Symphony* and *Nothing Like the Sun* which exhibited effects not be found anywhere in Joyce.

The candidate agreed structural avant-garde should have been emphasized more. He specified that Joyce's challenge to fictional code had been dealt with in the section on French writers (if not the British ones), who conceptualized literature as grids and mathematical structures (*Oulipo*, *nouveau roman*, Butor). He also thought the topic had been subsumed under the rubric of language as material, and touched on in regards to plagiarism and intertextuality, so had not seen it necessary to devote a fourth section to it.

As regards Irish literature, the starting point of the thesis had been the cross-Atlantic dialogue between France and the US, with the UK in-between; there was no reference to Irish writers in the *Transition* magazine. In Europe, avant-garde was understood as a group undertaking, whereas Irish literature would have required dealing with individualities: Beckett had been yet another "avant-postman" and to do him justice, an independent chapter

would have been needed. His influence on Brooke Rose, Barth, Federman, Gass, and Robbe-Grillet had been mentioned, albeit minimally. Throughout the thesis Beckett appeared as the author of the most often-quoted observation on *Finnegans Wake* as writing “not about something” but “that something itself.” Joyce’s influence on Beckett had already been a subject of several monographs (the same was true for Flann O’Brien): it would have meant recapitulating a ground already covered. The candidate rather preferred to focus on less established authors who deserved attention too.

Stein had not been systematized but passingly acknowledged as an influence on Burroughs, Gass and the authors of language poetry; a movement that revisited the early-twentieth-century transition, yet of the two poles (Jolas took Joyce and Stein for two extremes) had chosen Stein as synonymous with syntactic experimentation, in contrast to Joyce’s punning. Again, research on this had probably been done.

The chair opened a general debate and invited the Aix Marseille opponent, professor Moulin, to present his remarks first.

The opponent thanked the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle supervisor for inviting him to participate and the Czech university for their warm welcome. He complimented the candidate on his high level of research in a grand style of writing which was enlightened, pleasurable and attested to a mastery of academic English. The aim was to map the genealogy of Joyce’s influence on modernist and post-modernist writers from the UK, US and France, but only in the conclusion the thesis’ division in four parts, three geographically-structured ones plus one of general synthesis, was explained. A study of influences seemed rather anti-modernist than avant-garde to him: grouping writers on the basis of their geographical origin implied that a work was necessarily emanation of a particular culture, to which Joyce had been a counterexample. The material may have called for a more daring organization, such as along the three key strategies. Perhaps a different approach was preferred in the Czech Republic; also, the candidate had admittedly not been aiming at a philosophical theory. Still, the resulting chapter-by-chapter bibliography seemed inconvenient.

Thus the method appeared to attest to the (post-)modernist aesthetics of parataxis and collage, the research “contaminated” by its object. The opponent felt a lack of perspective, of distancing effect, which may have indicated the ideology of the (post-)modernist discourse, which was past its prime: the time may have come for a re-assessment of the actual limits of Joyce’s influence.

He emphasized the thesis was nevertheless an impressive achievement, with its analysis of the intertextual traces and stylistic echoes in the works of some forty writers of uneven magnitude. On the other hand, its formalist approach raised the question whether literature of exhaustion was not already exhausted and whether Joyceanism, or modernism, was still avant-garde, or whether it had rather become “arrière-garde,” a form of conformism. The candidate had deliberately not been interested in philosophical implications of Joyce’s writing, therefore it could not be held against him, yet the opponent would be interested whether the candidate was planning to tackle the issues in the future. This was however offered as an attempt at constructive, rather than aggressive criticism, to the candidate who was an extremely erudite, enthusiastic research-writer with remarkable expertise as a comparative literature scholar and an advanced knowledge of theory and criticism.

The chair thanked the opponent for the criticism and proceeded to his own remarks.

He praised the erudition and lucidity of the dissertation and declared his intention to leave out some of his critical remarks as they had already been addressed (i.e. regarding O'Brien or Beckett) as well as the question why Eva Figes had not been included, as it was of minor importance.

He said he was not convinced about the achievement of B. S. Johnson, who had been mentioned in the thesis regarding the materiality of the word and the book-as-object. To him, Johnson's experiments with blank pages seemed unoriginal and mechanical and did not contribute to his enjoyment of this type of avant-gardism. This led him to pose a question to what extent such experiments could present a base for value judgement and to what extent the scope of typographical experiment made the work better.

Nevertheless, he very warmly recommended the thesis and appreciated its language, scope and synthesis which could be developed into accounts of other literatures (Italian, etc.). He then proceeded to invite the University of West Bohemia opponent, doctor Potočňáková, to share her feedback.

The University of West Bohemia opponent appraised the scope, breadth and depth of the research and found the choice of the authors very illuminating, bringing together many diverse writers, including Winterson, Carter, etc. Reading Gray's *Janine 1982* and realizing Gray had admitted Joyce's influence, she was led to think whether Scottish authors, especially of the young generation, could have been included as well. There was also a Joycean influence on Hugh MacDiarmid, though this of course meant crossing the genre boundaries.

The chair thanked The University of West Bohemia opponent for her comment and invited the candidate to respond to the criticisms.

The candidate announced his intention to answer the comments in reverse order. He agreed that materialist poetics extended from prose fiction to poetry and to MacDiarmid (cf. the poem "In Memory of James Joyce"); however, that would have meant crossing genre boundaries. Joycean influence on Scotland had been briefly mentioned (Gray as an influence on Welsh and other writers emerging in the eighties and nineties), yet including it as a whole would have had required much more substantial treatment.

As regards the chair's comment, the candidate did not see any disagreement. He had criticized *Travelling People* for its discrepancy between the attention to the form and the thinness of its narrative material. The question of usefulness of such experiments was a relevant one. Johnson's "book in the box" (*The Unfortunates*) had been criticized as a blind alley, yet for Johnson represented a deeper mimesis. An elegy for a friend who had died of cancer, its aleatory ordering was meant to convey the ramblings of the mind and the carcinogenic growth of cells. Such justifications were a saving grace, although the candidate agreed the last three works, especially *See the Old Lady Decently*, were of better quality and accordingly had been dealt with in far more length.

The question of value judgment was a pertinent one. The approach of the thesis had been less axiological than descriptive: experimentation had not been a value, but a trait, an empirically observed phenomenon. Only then had it been judged based on whether it was a mere imitation, or a personal application to extra-literary concerns such as gender, social politics, technopoetics etc. The materiality of language rendered those texts something to which very

few rules could be brought, since those very rules were being explored: the works insisted on challenging any pre-established value judgements.

The candidate thanked the Aix Marseille opponent for the useful feedback and expressed his conviction that the thesis did not preach Joyceanism. The candidate saw the authors as contemporaries of Joyce, sharing similar concerns and participating in the same tradition of “making it new,” although he may not have renounced Joyceanism explicitly enough. The contamination might have been a necessary outcome of the *post modo* paradox. A deductive approach had been taken, i.e. instead of formulating a definition and looking for its proofs, the candidate had looked for departures from Joyce and only subsequently had he systematized them and formulated what sort of Joyce they constructed. In this, Jolas’s revolution of the word and the three key strategies had come together neatly. The candidate agreed the study of influences was the most rear-garde of all approaches and the thesis might need to be rewritten as a mapping of a field of communicating impulses, as he too had come to the conclusion the implicitly entailed formalist approach would have been better.

The chair initiated an open debate, to which the members of the public were invited too. He also noted that nothing that was good could become outdated in literary criticism.

The Charles University opponent returned to the question of the absence of Beckett: since the thesis did imply a genealogy, the question where Beckett fits in should be addressed, even in case there was a composite influence.

With regards to the issue of genealogy, the Charles University supervisor posed the question of what constituted Joycean avant-garde, to what extent seeing the traits as implying a paradigm already signalled trivialization or a programmatic avant-gardism. Especially in regards to Lyotard’s definition of the post-modern and Guattari’s critique of *laissez-faire* conceptualizations, the question to him was to what extent the Joycean avant-garde specifically might entail an inherently critical aspect in comparison to post-modernist writing seen as *post modo*, a nascent discourse.

The Aix Marseille opponent offered his answer by quoting the conclusion of the thesis, saying: “what was in the beginning and what would have been in the end” was “the word”; which could perhaps be read as “the Word.” In a little-known reading of Joyce by Thomas J. J. Altizer, an American experimental theologian, Joyce’s *oeuvre* was presented as a blasphemous re-writing of the Eucharist. Christianity, an influential discourse in the Western culture, was structured around the incarnation of “the Word”: and the word was also at the centre of the Joycean enterprise, deconstruction and anti-logocentrism. He noted that “avant-garde” was a military word and in the arts had been tied to what Blake described as “mental fight” – while possible targets of the fight might suggest elements of the answer.

The candidate thanked the opponent and added that the last paragraph of the thesis offered one more possible rearrangement, along the line of the authors’ relationship to religion/Christianity, which connected with the issue of post-colonial (often overstated), anti-nationalist, anti-establishment and anarchist perspectives on Joyce, who at the same time had been turned into the high priest of a certain literary dogma.

The Université Sorbonne Nouvelle supervisor said in regards to Beckett that finally there was a critical *reglement* of Joyce, who was a missing icon in France, as Beckett was the only one who made the line between Joyce and the other literary “big other” in most critical accounts.

And yet in France all avant-gardists had been great readers of Joyce (cf. Derrida). In the US, UK and France the reference to Joyce was of course balanced differently, but now there was a measuring stick thanks to the dissertation, though issues of translation were the prize paid for it.

The candidate concurred that in France Joyce existed in translation only and his influence was downplayed (apart from in Mauriac, Butor) and credit was given to other novel writers. In the US, the influence of Nabokov, Borges, Federman, Joyce was a part of the landscape, too, and for "Surfiction" Beckett was the stronger influence, so matters were of course a little more complicated.

The Université Sorbonne Nouvelle supervisor reminded the candidate about Sollers's triad "Proust, Joyce, Kafka," as Proust could neither be quoted alone, nor in comparison to Joyce alone, and therefore Kafka had to be added.

The chair also suggested Musil would have been another likely candidate.

The chair then ended the discussion and summarized the proceedings. He expressed his hope this had been a good defence during which many important issues had been raised. The candidate had shown his virtuosity and convincingly proven he was at home in his field.

The public part was closed and the committee proceeded to the secret ballot.

According to the Université Sorbonne rules, the candidate was declared "docteur littérature générale comparée de l'Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris III," with "mention très honorable avec félicitations du jury" and allowed to republish the dissertation.

In terms of the Charles University conventions, the committee voted unanimously (yes: 7, no: 0, abstained: 0) in favour of conferring the doctoral title.

The chair thanked everyone for their contributions and congratulated doctor Vichnar for his extraordinary success.

Recording secretary: Bc. Olga Peková

Chair's signature:

