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Introduction: Joycean Avant-Gardes Special Issue

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Joycean Avant-Gardes

It seems quite remarkable that the time period between the first publication of *Dubliners* in 1914 and the appearance of the first published section of “Work in Progress” alongside Tristan Tzara in Ford Madox Ford’s transatlantic review in 1924 was only ten years, remarkable because of the long intellectual journey travelled by Joyce in those years. However apparently large the gap between the scrupulously disciplined naturalism of those early stories and the extravagantly polysemantic play of *Finnegans Wake* might once have appeared, they now appear to be part of an ongoing project of radical literary innovation. However distant Joyce’s professional relationships with and attitudes to particular avant-garde movements and personalities might have been, and however downplayed by the first generations of his defenders, Joyce now appears more and more to readers as an avant-garde writer. If the performances staged by the Zurich Dadaists or by Alfred Jarry found immediate, vociferous responses from audiences, Joyce’s output has gradually found an audience that responds in a quieter but nonetheless determinedly divergent manner. This issue proposes to add a set of voices to that response by considering his achievement alongside that of his avant-garde contemporaries across the arts rather than despite them or in preference over them.

Associations between Joyce’s work and that of contemporary avant-garde movements are of course intrinsic to his story, especially if we think of the cosmopolitan contexts in which he lived and wrote and the placing of his work in periodical publications throughout his career. We have only to think of his first adopted home in Trieste and the influence there of Marinetti and Futurism, of the huge importance for his gradual breakthrough to an international audience of the advocacy of Ezra Pound, of his important dialogue with Wyndham Lewis, of the juxtaposition of *A Portrait* in its serial publication in *The Egoist* with a translation of Lautréamont’s *Maldoror*, of his residence in wartime Zürich at the time when it was also home to Tzara and the *Cabaret Voltaire*, of his attendance at the Dada trials in Paris with Pound, and of his close proximity to the members of various avant-garde movements through his associations with Sylvia Beach, Adrienne Monnier and Eugène Jolas. Joyce’s letters admit something of these connections: his interest in the avant-garde classicism of Guillaume Apollinaire’s play *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*, for example, is indicated in the letter he wrote to his brother shortly after his arrival in Paris in 1920 (L III 10); his sense of his public association with the avant-garde is indicated by the letter he wrote to Stanislaus in 1921 claiming that the Irish press were reporting “[t]hat I founded in Zurich the dadaist movement which is now exciting Paris” (L III 22). Yet, even if Joyce had never left Dublin, he would have been directly or indirectly in contact with a force of the early avant-garde. It was Yeats who in December 1896 went to the first production of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* at Lugné-Poe’s theatre in Paris and declared in his reminiscence of it the new epoch that was to become modernism: “After Stephane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour

and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God". For Yeats at times that savage must have been Joyce.

An avant-garde turn in internationalist Joyce and modernist studies has arguably been underway for some time, perhaps as a necessary accompaniment or corrective to an uncompromisingly "authorial" Joyce, an authorially compartmentalised modernist studies and a historicist modernism in place at the turn of the century. It is sustained by the revival of avant-garde practices across the arts in the new century which have no doubt benefitted from the new outlets for independent and experimental work and the new forms of social grouping made possible by the growth of social media. It is no doubt fuelled also by a deeper new understanding of the political and practical situation of avant-gardes. Until recently, debates around the term have been structured by a few foundational accounts. In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, composed in 1947 and published in 1968, Renato Poggioli sees the term as originally derived from the military "vanguard" by progressive and militant political and social movements in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, only to be later adopted by artistic collectives, movements and sects who exhibited their opposition to an aesthetic status quo in little magazines and manifestos.¹ Poggioli is central in establishing the understanding of the avant-garde as involving an antagonist, collective artistic agency. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Peter Bürger historicizes this antagonism, arguing that twentieth-century avant-garde movements aimed to dismantle what he calls the institution of art, the frameworks according to which art is produced, distributed, and understood.² The avant-garde status of a work is thus dependent neither upon the consciousness of its author, nor upon its contents, but upon the way it functions within society: avant-garde movements attempt to reintegrate art into the practice of life. Yet Bürger's criterion has been seen by many subsequent critics as overly restrictive, as he himself points to the subsequent institutional absorption of surrealism, Dada, cubism, etc., even if, in this process, these movements radically changed the values of the art world. Rather than a discrete category of practice with a single agenda, Raymond Williams, in essays in the 1980s, understands the avant-garde as "a range of distinct, and in many cases opposed formations" (79), separated from modernism often only by degree.³ Williams, in contrast to Bürger, points to the dangers inherent in the integration of art and life: the cooption of art into mass culture, in the form of the aestheticized commodity and commercial art, and its incorporation into spectacles of political propaganda. If the various kinds of avant-garde artistic practice emphasized pre-rational and unconscious creativity and drew upon a politics of anarchism, nihilism and revolutionary socialism, this led to a range of political results from temporary liberation and resistance to absorption into Fascist national identifications or libertarian deregulation.

Yet recent critical works have questioned these central conceptions of the avant-garde, providing new geographically, culturally and critically diverse perspectives. A couple instances of this new turn have specific relevance for this special issue. For Jonathan Eburne and Rita Felski, in the introduction to a special issue of *New Literary History*, "What is an Avant-Garde?," the question becomes a meta-critical opportunity, prompting consideration of the "conditions and repercussions," the "frameworks and critical faculties" of scholarly accounts.⁴ They reject established "biographical narratives" of European movements association with left-wing revolutionary pathos that end in failure or co-optation and propose instead a diffuse, fragmentary and discontinuous avant-garde of experimental political and artistic movements operating in contexts such feminism, the postcolonial, and commodity

culture in locations as far-flung as Russia, Senegal and the United States. In a pair of essays which are taken up by two of the essays in this volume, Marjorie Perloff questions the central critical identification of the avant-garde with collective practice. She shows how the work of Marcel Duchamp is both largely constitutive of and divergent from Dada, the quintessential European avant-garde collective: “And there’s the rub. Remove Duchamp from the Dada playing field and it rapidly shrinks to half its size. And even then, what about Gertrude Stein, arguably the most radical writer of the Dada period [...]? Or, for that matter, the presence of James Joyce?”⁵ She offers both a critique of accepted understandings of the avant-garde and a prescription for future study: “The dialectic between individual artist and avant-garde groups is seminal to twentieth-century art making. But not every movement is an avant-garde and not every avant-garde poet or artist is associated with a movement. What we need, it seems, is a more accurate genealogy of avant-garde practices than we now have.”⁶

It is to this genealogy that we would like to contribute with this special issue, which began with a panel at the Dublin Joyce Symposium 2012. The panel was part of a broader swell of interest in Joyce’s relationship to European literature, enabled by Geert Lernout and Wim Van Mierlo’s 2004 two-volume collection, *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe*.⁷ This special issue has three parts: an overview of Joyce’s avant-garde critical and artistic reception by Tim Conley; arguments for the connections between Joyce’s writing and a more-or-less contemporary avant-garde by Catherine Flynn and Hsin-Yu Hung; and explorations of Joyce’s impact on subsequent avant-garde practices that acknowledge different kinds of indebtedness by Jonathan Eburne, Dennis Duncan and Scarlett Baron. In these six essays, a number of diverse connections and approaches to Joyce and the avant-garde are combined and a suitably unsettling and innovative group of texts discussed. As a whole, these essays aim to revise our conception of Joyce as well as of the avant-garde.

For Conley, in “‘Meddled Muddlingisms’: The Uncertain Avant-Gardes of *Finnegans Wake*,” as for Eburne and Felski, the question of the avant-garde nature of *Finnegans Wake* is more generative than any answer, revealing the values and expectations of its respondents. Conley’s own suggestion is that *Finnegans Wake* prompts us to escape from taxonomies and categories. He argues that *Finnegans Wake* is thus usefully understood through Bürger’s representation of the avant-garde as offering the means to all ends through its defiance of the historical trajectory of formal development. Conley argues that the *Wake*’s character as a formal resource that leads it to generate an array of responses.

In “*Finnegans Wake*’s Radio Montage: Man-Made Static, the Avant-Garde and Collective Reading,” Flynn situates the semantic excess of the *Wake* within the tradition of avant-garde literary montage, in particular that of Guillaume Apollinaire. She argues that Joyce constructs the radio passage in 1936 to respond to Adolf Hitler’s contemporary misuse of the new technology of radio. Subverting monologic authoritarian discourse by activating readers to read collectively, the montage form of the *Wake* is of continued power in the face of a contemporary dominance of instrumental rationality and mass consumption. The ideal sociality of *Finnegans Wake* reading groups offers a new possibility for avant-garde collective agency.

Hung’s essay on “‘Circe’ and Expressionist Drama” develops a carefully supported argument about Joyce’s use of Georg Buchner’s *Woyzeck* (1897) and Oscar Kokoshka’s *Hiob* (1917). Joyce draws, she argues, on lighting effects, declarative dialogue, distorted

physiognomy to generate “theatre as magic show.” However, if Expressionists represent states of psychic distortion, Joyce invokes their means to make himself an “Über-Expressionist, who calls for spiritual renewal and liberation, creating a dynamic transcendence.” Hung’s essay emerged from the original panel discussion and was left unrevised at the time of her death. It is included here in this form as a tribute to the emerging contribution to Joyce studies of a highly promising scholar.

Eburne’s essay discusses the Mexican literary avant-garde of the 1960s and especially the magazine *S.Nob* edited by Salvador Elizondo in which the opening of *Finnegans Wake* was annotated and translated and Elizondo’s own extraordinary 1965 cult novel *Farabeuf*.

Dennis Duncan’s essay explores the creative presence of Joyce in a self-consciously fraudulent literary performance, from the writer who co-founded Oulipo, a notable member of the avant-garde group Oulipo, whose name abbreviates the phrase “Ouvroir de littérature potentialle.” Raymond Queneau’s *On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes* (*We Always Treat Women Too Well*), populates an outrageously farcical fiction of the Easter 1916 Rising with characters from *Ulysses*. Published under the pseudonym Sally Mara, the novel is followed by Sally Mara’s fictional memoir, in which she as pornographer, departs on a Dedalian journey to Paris.

Baron’s essay explores the intertextualities between Joyce and another self-consciously fraudulent literary performance in Georges Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual*. Perec, as she points out, draws on the French translation of *Ulysses* and mischievously introduces a version of its translator, Auguste Morel, as “Morell of Hoaxville” allowing her to unpack the hoaxing forms of intertextuality that typify Perec.

In a recent essay reflecting on the argument and reception of his highly influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger writes that the failure of the avant-garde to dismantle the institution of art was entwined with its success: its radical alteration of the values which inform that institution. He closes the essay with the idea that a future may come—“a future that we cannot imagine”—in which the sublation of art and life can occur.⁸ Joyce’s writing too we can understand in these terms as it does not so much destroy the notion of literature but rather open it up through profoundly restructuring its values. In doing so, Joyce’s work displays an implied trust and endorsement of the literature of the future.

¹ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.

² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Transl. Michael Shaw, introd. Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³ Raymond Williams and Tony Pinkney, *The Politics Of Modernism: Against The New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989).

⁴ Jonathan Eburne and Rita Felski, “What is an Avant-Garde?” *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010).

⁵ Marjorie Perloff, *Dada Without Duchamp / Duchamp Without Dada: Avant-Garde Tradition and the Individual Talent*. *Stanford Humanities Review*, 7.1 (1999): 48-78

⁶ Marjorie Perloff, “Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry” <http://marjorieperloff.com/essays/avant-garde-community-and-the-individual-talent/>

⁷ Geert Lernout and Wim Van Mierlo, *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe*, Vol. 1 and 2 (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004).

⁸ Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-garde” in Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski ed. “What is an Avant-Garde?” Special issue, *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010), 714.