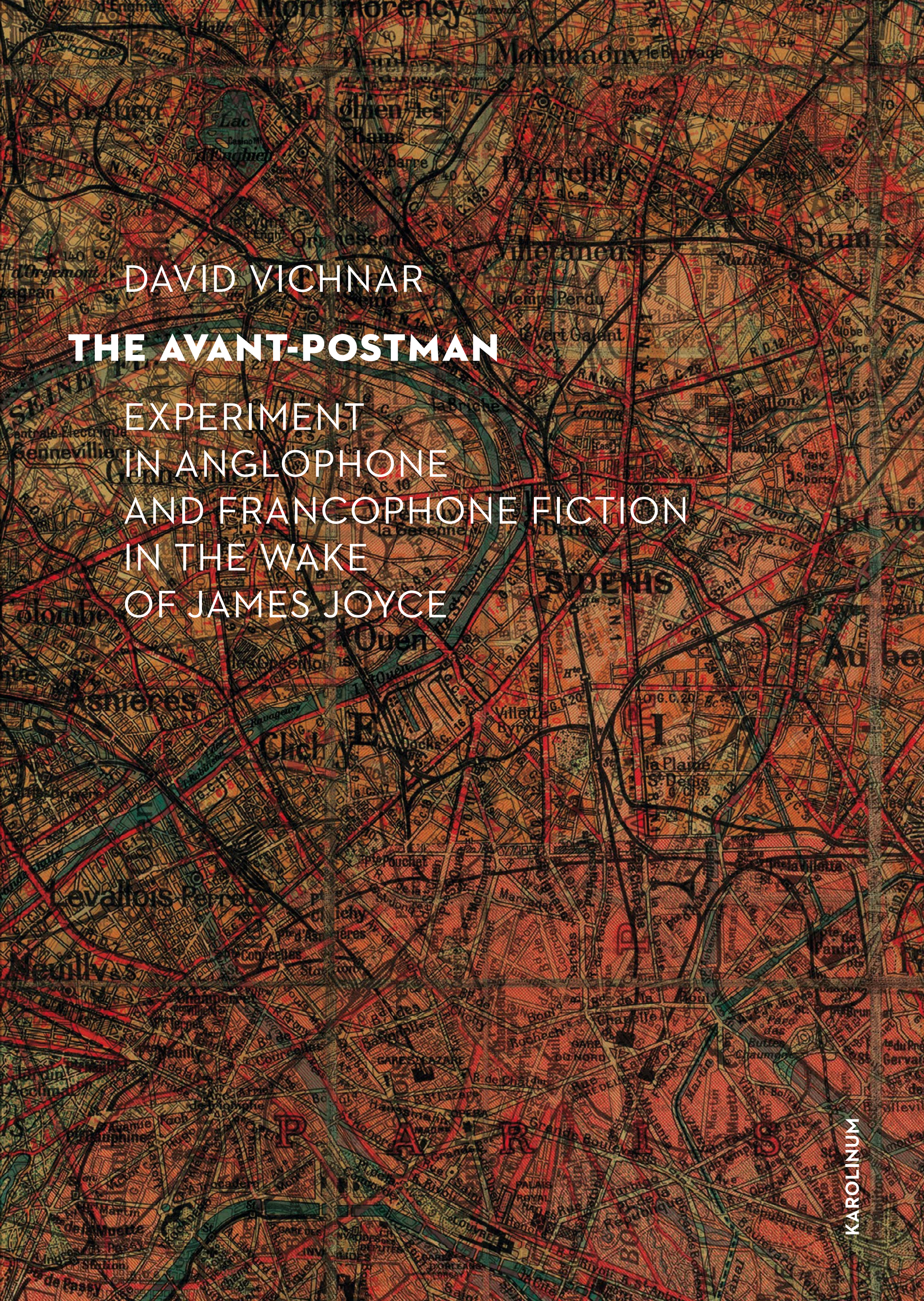

DAVID VICHNAR

THE AVANT-POSTMAN

EXPERIMENT IN ANGLOPHONE AND FRANCOPHONE FICTION IN THE WAKE OF JAMES JOYCE

KAROLINUM

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David Vichnar

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In the years following the defence of the thesis in March 2014 and during its lengthy rewriting process, versions of individual sections, author studies, and passages from this book have seen the light of print in the following publications:

1. *Subtexts: Essays on Fiction* (Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2015) p. 120 (esp. sections on Kathy Acker, Christine Brooke-Rose, the Oulipo, Iain Sinclair, and Phillipe Sollers);
2. "Wars Waged With/Against Joyce: James Joyce and post-1984 British Fiction," *Joycean Legacies*, ed. Martha Carpentier (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 150–71 (esp. parts of Chapter Five);
3. "Between the Pun and the Portmanteau: Multilingualism in and after Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*," *The Poetics of Multilingualism – La Poétique du plurilinguisme*, eds. Patrizia Noel & Levente Seláf (Cambridge Scholars: Newcastle upon Tyne, 2017) pp. 269–80 (esp. sections on Maurice Roche and Phillippe Sollers);

4. “Remediating Joyce’s Techno-poetics: Mark Amerika, Kenneth Goldsmith, Mark Z. Danielewski,” *Prague Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (September 2019) pp. 119–39 (esp. parts of Chapter Eight).

NOTE ON THE TEXT & DEDICATION

Wherever available, quotations from French fiction are provided in their English translation in the main text, and accompanied by the French original in corresponding footnotes. Where no English translation exists (or was not available), the relevant meaning of the French original is elucidated in the commentary. Both French originals and English translations are included in the chapter-by-chapter bibliography side by side.

I dedicate this book to its two spiritual fathers, Louis Armand and Jean Bessière. *Per aspera ad astra.*

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INTRODUCTION

JOYCE THE AVANT-

We are still learning to be James Joyce's contemporaries,
to understand our interpreter.

Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (1983)

The famous opening of Richard Ellmann's monumental biography casts its subject matter—the life and work of James Joyce—in a peculiar double temporality. As if Joyce were somehow ahead of his fellow writers and us, his future readers; as if the actuality of his writing and life had somehow not yet exhausted their potential; as if Joyce's writing, in a messianic fashion, were dependent upon some second coming; as if its message, just as Sir Tristram in the second paragraph of *Finnegans Wake*, had "passencore rearrived" (*FW* 3.4–5). As if the novelty of Joyce's work, its "being ahead," its *avant-*, brought about certain belatedness within our reception of it, a *post*--ness.

The notion of being ahead, of being so novel as to seem to come from the future, is essential to the programmes of the movements of artistic avant-garde that have redefined 20th-century culture. Conversely, the notion of belatedness, of having one's present moment already defined by a past that somehow pre-programmes it, with little left to do for the present beyond reenacting, repeating, or forging the past's originary actions and statements, resonates within the common detraction of post-war neo-avant-gardes in canonical criticism.[1] In a certain sense, the task set by Richard Ellmann—"to become Joyce's contemporary" (*JJ*, 3)—is reversed here: the present work covers the oeuvre of fifty post-war writers for whom Joyce was a contemporary, who consciously followed in the footsteps of Joyce's "revolution of the word," and took cue from his exploration of the materiality of language and the aesthetic autonomy of fiction.

Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* form a joint starting point from which genealogical lines of development are drawn and constellations of concepts are formed. The argument traces the many departures from Joyce's poetics in the post-war Anglo-American and Francophone novel, which came to be dubbed—by their adherents and detractors alike—"experimental" or

1 Also, one encounters this awareness of belatedness vis-à-vis Joyce everywhere in Joycean scholarship, which ever so often finds itself *already in the text*, coming not from the outside, but somehow generated from, solicited by, the Joyce text which always already includes, as it were, its own theory. Cf. my own *Joyce Against Theory* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2010), in view of whose overall argument, the criticism of Joyce appears as a discourse centred around a few governing notions and operations already "at work" in Joyce's text.

"avant-garde." The timeframe is, roughly speaking, the second half of the 20th century, with a coda on twelve writers active post-2000, bringing the entire genealogy into the present.

1. PRELIMINARY NOTES ON THE NOVEL, EXPERIMENT, AND THE AVANT-GARDE

The two adjectives used throughout—"experimental" and "avant-garde"—as well as the genre of the "novel" itself to which they apply in Joyce's case, are some of the most elusive terms of the critical discourse, their definitions as numerous as their definers, their own genealogies as complex and subjective as the present one of post-Joycean avant-garde experimentalism. Still, some preliminary notes on their understanding here, and application to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, are in order.

In 1920, just when *The Little Review* was facing obscenity trial for publishing the masturbatory "Nausicaa" chapter and Joyce was already making "Nausicaa" pale in comparison with the chapter underway ("Circe"), Georg Lukács published his influential *Theory of the Novel*. In a not-so-rare instance of modernist telepathy (as *Ulysses*, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and *Der Zauberberg* were still in the making, and *Finnegans Wake* was of course still a twinkle in Joyce's eye), Lukács immediately brought the genre of the novel into relation with the epic, by subtitling his study "A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature." Yet the relation is one of contrast: to compare the modern novel with the ancient epic is like comparing a WWI tank with Achilles' shield – they "differ from one another not by their author's fundamental intentions but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted."[2] Homer's epics are communal creations of a "concrete totality"; the modern novel is individualistic and made of "heterogeneous fragments." Whereas the modern novel has of necessity its beginning-middle-end,

> the way Homer's epics begin in the middle and do not finish at the end is a reflexion of the truly epic mentality's total indifference to any form of architectural construction [...] everything in the epic has a life of its own and derives its completeness from its own inner significance.[3]

If, in Homer's *Iliad*, "a rounded universe blossoms into all-embracing life," then the modern novel depicts a world where "the extensive totality of life

2 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (orig. 1920; Cambridge: MIT, 1971) 56.
3 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 67–8.

is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in totality."[4] So far so melancholy and nostalgic, but Lukács is perceptive enough to note that the very consummated character of Homer's epics was a hindrance to any further development of the Greek epic as a form. They were memorised for centuries and memorialised when written down—an unmovable boulder in the middle of the road. Whereas the sheer fragmentariness and incompletion of the novel as genre in the modern times is not only a crisis, but a chance: the genre remains open for constant innovation and redefinition, which is the only way of keeping it alive and relevant.

It is not difficult to see how Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* fit the bill of "a concrete totality" of a "rounded universe with no beginning and no end" of the epic while also composed of the modern-novelistic "heterogenous fragments" and busily engaging with the "immanence of meaning in life." And so it does not surprise that when surveying, from the opposite end of the century, the development of the modern novel that Lukács could only divine, Harold Bloom went so as far as to pronounce the *Wake* the central text of our (Viconian) "age of chaos," at least as regards its aesthetic merit: "The *Wake*, like Proust's *Search*, would be as close as our chaos could come to the heights of Shakespeare and Dante."[5] Where Bloom's *Western Canon* culminates and stops,[6] this book seeks to begin. Just as Lukács was hopeful about the fragmented novel's future potential, so will the genealogy mapped here of the post-war writing in the wake of Joyce's revolution of language show that for all its epic completeness, it provided experimentalists-to-come with enough stuff to dream on.

The adjective "experimental" will be understood here as pertaining to what, around the time Lukács was postulating his theory of the novel, philosopher John Dewey identified as the chief principle of the development of modern science:

> The development of modern science began when there was recognized in certain technical fields a power to utilize variations as the starting points of new observations, hypotheses and experiments. The growth of the experimental as distinct from the dogmatic habit of mind is due to increased ability to utilize variations for constructive ends instead of suppressing them.[7]

4 Ibid, 56.
5 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon—The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt, 1994) 422.
6 "Joyce's Agon with Shakespeare" is Chapter 18 out of 23, accompanied by chapters on Woolf, Kafka, Borges, the only "follower" after Joyce (of sorts) in Bloom's genealogy being Beckett.
7 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (La Salle: Open Court, 1925) xiv.

Replacing the "modern science" in Dewey's argument with the concept of "revolution of language," an understanding of experimentalism arises that is conditioned by "a power to utilise variations as the starting points of new observations" and the "ability to utilize variations for constructive ends instead of suppressing them." Experimentation, thus, is less a question of programme than a "habit of mind," a mode of experiencing.

To say this is to commit an etymological pleonasm, as the word "experiment" came into English from the Old French *esperment, meaning "practical knowledge" and consequently "trial, proof, example, lesson," derived from the Latin experimentum* ("a trial, test, proof, experiment"), a verbal noun of action stemming from *experiri*, "to test, try." And out of this verbal root grows the word *experientia*, denoting "knowledge gained by repeated trials." In turn, the structure of the verb entails the prefix *ex-*, "out of," *peritus*, "tested, passed over."[8] Stemming from experience, thus experiment is the process of departing from what has been tested, of gaining knowledge by venturing beyond the known compass and toward the "testing ground of new literature." Hence the double focus, throughout the portraits of the writers included in this Joycean genealogy, on practice and theory of fiction as inseparable: *experimentation* always related to "bearing witness," to having "personal experience."

The meaning of "experimentalism" as conceived in this book will also come close to what, in the context of the visual arts, W. J. T. Mitchell has termed "irrealism." Departing from the conviction that all representations "are conventional in the sense that they depend upon symbol systems that might, in principle, be replaced by some other system" (and so "realism" might be nothing more than "simply the most conventional convention"),[9] the real difference between a "realist" tendency and its countertendency (by whatever name called) consists in their attitude to the cognitive and epistemological aspects of their representation. It is not, then, that realism is somehow the "standard," "familiar," or "habitual" mode of representation (were it so, no diachronic accounting for the many changes realism itself has undergone in just the last 200 years would be possible), but that it is "representation plus a belief system" regarding "the representational mode or what it represents."[10] This belief entails the following:

> Truth, certainty, and knowledge are structurally connoted in realistic representation: they constitute the ideology or automatism necessary for it to construct a reality. That

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8 Cf., e.g., James Douglas, *English Etymology – A Textbook of Derivatives* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1872) 46.

9 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Realism, Irrealism, and Ideology: A Critique of Nelson Goodman," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25.1 (Spring 1991): 27.

10 Mitchell, "Realism, Irrealism, and Ideology," 30.

> is why realism is such an apt vehicle for spreading lies, confusion, and disinformation, for wielding power over mass publics, or for projecting fantasy.[11]

Now, Mitchell of course is not as naïve as to posit "irrealism" as a simple binary opposite to realistic representation, for their commonalities are as important as differences. Still, "irrealism," in its three-part self-representation as "utopian ideal," "scientific fact," and "historical consensus," remains—in contrast with realism's "structural connotation" of its epistemological certainties—"systematically ambivalent about its own 'certainty,' while relatively certain about its 'rightness.'"[12] Understood along the lines of Mitchell's irrealism, writing labelled experimental in this book is avant-gardist (a "utopian ideal"), invested in a non-realist mimesis of "the real" ("scientific fact"), and historically determined. This "chameleon status" of such writing, Mitchell continues, is not a weakness: on the contrary, it is precisely what gives this writing its rhetorical power as a positive, ahistorical—and yet historically determined—account of representational systems, [...] not as a philosophy that 'supplants' realism, but as a therapeutic thorn in its side, a way of keeping realism honest."[13]

This is where Mitchell's "irrealism" and this book's "experimentalism" dovetails into "avant-gardism." Writing described as "avant-garde" will here be understood—along the lines of Renato Poggioli's seminal study on *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*—as marked by its concentration on *linguistic creativity* as "a necessary reaction to the flat, opaque, and prosaic nature of our public speech, where the practical end of quantitative communication spoils the quality of expressive means," a reaction with an essentially social task in that it functions as "at once cathartic and therapeutic in respect to the degeneration afflicting common language through conventional habits."[14]

So, a therapeutic thorn in realism's side, again. Hence, avant-garde writing is one whose "cult of novelty and even of the strange" has definable historical and social causes in the "tensions of our bourgeois, capitalistic, and technological society."[15] Informed by the aesthetic expressivism of such predecessors as Benedetto Croce, Poggioli's is a morphological, trans-historical analysis (in his account, the first avant-garde is not cubism or futurism, but romanticism), which serves him well in the effort to avoid losing sight of the avant-garde forest for the idiosyncrasy of the individual movements' trees. Poggioli speaks of the avant-garde as "the dialectic of movements," a struggle for the "affir-

11 Ibid, 31.

12 Ibid, 33.

13 Ibid.

14 Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde,* trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968) 37.

15 Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde,* 80, 107.

mation of the avant-garde spirit in all cultural fields."[16] There are chiefly four "attitudes" informing this dialectics, two of which are "immanent" to the concept of a movement, and two of which "transcend" it. *Activism*, which springs from "the sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure"; and *antagonism,* the formation of a movement in order to "agitate against something or someone," whether "the academy, tradition" or "a master" or more generally "the public," are the immanent ones.[17] The "transcendental" antagonism, which goes beyond specific targets by "beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way," Poggioli dubs *nihilism;* finally, activism pushed beyond any reachable goal, which "even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements," is called *agonism.*

An "agonistic concept par excellence," then, is the idea of transition, the sense of belonging to an intermediate stage, to "a present already distinct from the past and to a future in potentiality which will be valid only when the future is actuality," and it is at this point that the name James Joyce first enters Poggioli's argument.[18] Poggioli's avant-garde, turned thusly into an aesthetic movement and stripped of its immediate socio-historical context, comes to resemble some of the more neutral, apolitical definitions of modernism. To take but Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*: Poggioli's tetrad of activism, antagonism, nihilism, and agonism can be found as underlying Stephen Dedalus' own rebellion against and gradual abandonment of family, Church, country, and embracing as his motto *Non serviam*, after Milton's Satan. Stephen's other creed, "the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning" (*P*, 208), paves the way towards avant-garde marginality and purposeful obscurity. Futurism, however subtle, is present in Stephen's "desire to press in my arms the loveliness that has not yet come into the world" (*P*, 212); agonism underwrites his existential angst in his extrication from the strictures of religion, and courses through his most famous final invocation: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (*P*, 213).[19]

In his famous re-contextualisation of Poggioli's argument within a broader historic-philosophical framework, Peter Bürger replaces Poggioli's vague

16 Ibid, 25.

17 Ibid, 25–6.

18 "That the avant-garde spirit was conscious of what this concept leads to is proved by the fact that a literary review, written in English, brought out for years in Paris the work of expatriate and cosmopolitan writers; it commends itself greatly to us for having published fragments of *Finnegans Wake* when James Joyce's extreme experiment was still 'work in progress.' The founder and director of this review, Eugene Jolas, chose to entitle it, paradoxically with an initial minuscule, *transition*" (Ibid, 25–6).

19 For a more detailed discussion, see Robert Langbaum, "Review of Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-garde*" in *boundary 2,* 1.1 (Autumn 1972): 234–41.

trans-historicism with an insistence on the inherence of the historical avant-garde praxis to its proper historical context:

> In a changed context, the resumption of avant-garde intentions with the means of avant-gardism can no longer even have the limited effectiveness the historical avant--gardes achieved. To the extent that the means by which the avant-gardistes hoped to bring about the sublation of art have attained the status of works of art, the claim that the praxis of life is to be renewed can no longer be legitimately connected with their employment. To formulate more pointedly: the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely *avant-gardiste* intentions.[20]

The dilemma throughout this book will be whether one can limit the function of the avant-garde to merely its linguistic creativity and collective impulse as anaesthetic markers (á la Poggioli) or whether its theory and praxis need to include a specific mode of political-critical engagement.

Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* construes modernism's non-instrumental aestheticism as signifying the artistic autonomy that makes modern art the institutional collaborator of modern bourgeois ideology. Bürger's political plotting of the art of modernity has direct repercussion for his detraction of post-war neo-avant-gardes. The shared intention, on the part of the many historical avant-gardes, of "returning art to the praxis of life," argues Bürger, falls flat when revived within a context where the avant-garde itself has become institutionalised as art, "the means of avant-gardism" no longer achieving "even the limited effectiveness" of the historical avant-gardes: "Neo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term, which means that it negates the avant-gardiste intention of returning art to the praxis of life."[21]

As will become clear, one of the advantages of basing a "Joycean avant-garde" on Joyce's close alliance with the *transition* magazine consists in sidestepping the avant-garde/neo-avant-garde dichotomy in favour of a programme of writing which serves "cathartic and therapeutic" purposes in respect to "the degeneration afflicting common language through conventional habits" (à la Poggioli), while at the same time remaining "autonomous" and "anti-institutional" in its insistence on "the disintegration of words and their subsequent reconstruction on other planes," and in its ambivalent attitude to "the plain reader"[22] (à la Bürger).

20 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1984) 58.

21 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 59.

22 Eugene Jolas, "The Revolution of Language and James Joyce," *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress: A Symposium*, ed. Samuel Beckett (New York: New Directions, 1929) 79–80.

2. JOYCE THE AVANT-GARDIST: THE *WAKE* IN *TRANSITION*

The *transition* magazine, during the eleven years of its activity (1927–38), published not only seventeen instalments from Joyce's "Work in Progress" (to become *Finnegans Wake* in 1939), as well as all the twelve essays that were to form the *Our Exagmination* collection, but also numerous theoretical analyses, polemics, proclamations, and defences of the work against its detractors. Its guiding spirits were Elliot Paul and especially Eugène Jolas (1894–1952), an American raised in Alsace, whose trilingual upbringing was reflected in the cosmopolitanism of the journal, arguably the last of the great vanguard vehicles of high modernism, and definitely the only one (at least of such scale and durability) explicitly devoted to the avant-garde.

In another instance of creative telepathy, Jolas himself echoed Dewey's observations on the development of modern science when conceiving of *transition* as a "documentary organ" dedicated to presenting what he referred to later as "pan-romanticism," and in retrospect, Jolas characterised *transition* as "a workshop of the intercontinental spirit, a proving ground of the new literature, a laboratory for poetic experiment."[23] Jolas' avant-garde undertaking, too, was marked by a certain belatedness: by the launch of its first number in 1927, the historical avant-garde had been on the wane if not defunct, and so *transition* gained another, retrogressive dimension: that of the archive. There is, thus, another sense in which *transition* proves a useful starting point for the genealogical lines charted in this book: its function of a documentary organ of the historical avant-garde is applicable to those post-war avant-garde groups, schools, or movements that chose to "perpetuate [Joyce's] creation," thereby becoming documentary organs of the effects of his poetics.

As a documentary organ, *transition*'s dedication to preserving the crucial documents of the historical avant-garde was impeccable: the list of the contributors to its first issues reads like an avant-garde who's who. With Dadaism, Tristan Tzara is present, e.g., in *transition* 19–20 (June 1930) right next to Joyce in the "Revolution of the Word" section. But that is just one of his occasional cameos: when it comes to Dada, Jolas had a clear editorial preference for the Zurich branch, and so *transition* 21 (1932), the one with the section, "HOMAGE TO JAMES JOYCE," comes with a cover-design by Hans Arp, and features the work of Richard Huelsenbeck, Hugo Ball, and Kurt Schwitters, among others. In 1936, *transition* 25 celebrates the twenty years of Dada by presenting the first English translations of Ball's "Fragments from a Dada Diary" and Huelsenbeck's "Dada Lives" manifesto. Surrealism is present—through the work of Louis Aragon, Robert Desnos, Philippe Soupault, and others—from *transition*

23 *Transition Workshop*, ed. Eugene Jolas (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1949) 13.