

Book Reviews

Benjamin Kohlmann

Committed Styles. Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Kohlmann's subtle and extremely informative study of the literature of the 1930s addresses the uses to which literature was put, encompassing the troubled neutrality of William Empson, attempts to unite the demands of artistic innovation and political revolution among the Surrealists and members of the Mass-Observation movement, and artistic commitment to the cause of communism as exemplified by Edward Upward. While critics in the past have tended to focus on the extent to which the literature of the period took sides, Kohlmann takes a more nuanced view as he highlights its "deep-seated anxieties" and "political articulacy" (5).

Much of the left-wing literature is complex, necessitating a re-thinking of the terms on which criticism of the period should be premised. What does the term "the politics of writing" mean? asks Kohlmann. Unravelling its ambiguity by focusing on the notion of artistic autonomy is one of the major concerns of *Committed Styles*. Kohlmann identifies a tension between artistic autonomy and historical self-consciousness which, he demonstrates, rather than being resolved resurfaces in the works he discusses. The aim of Kohlmann's study is "to illustrate the variety of politicized writing during the 1930s and, in doing so, to reopen some key debates regarding the politics of writing during that decade" (13). Kohlmann highlights the various polarized political positions within the literary field and demonstrates the need for left-wing writers to come to terms with the artistic tensions and contradictions of the period.

In the first chapter Kohlmann looks backwards as he discusses I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and modernist poetry and their contributions to the Cambridge magazine *Experiment*. This chapter forms a basis for all subsequent discussions because it shows how Richards influenced the young generation of thirties writers. Kohlmann convincingly demonstrates that *Experiment* questions literature's contextual ties; its adherence to a modernist paradigm of writing came to be associated with an a-historical outlook, thereby blurring the conventional literary-historical boundary between the modernist 1920s and the political 1930s. Writers such as William Empson were inspired by *Experiment* to search for a "type of critical impartiality and political neutrality that would be capable of registering the decade's (1930s) political pressures (52). The writers discussed in *Committed Styles* did not merely follow modernism but wrote against it.

The four chapters on Empson, Surrealism, Mass Observation and Edward Upward focus on four keywords: honesty, revolution, fact and dream because these mirror the indeterminacies of the decade's political and artistic commitments. They bring together different ways of seeing culture and society and feature not only in the writers' literary works but also in their essays, treatises, reviews, diaries and letters, providing a vocabulary with which to negotiate conflicts. They also acted as an important stimulus for their writing.

Chapter five, the final chapter, is a worthy conclusion to Kohlmann's study. Based on a collection of essays that Kohlmann edited in 2014, it argues that Upward and other politically committed writers have been largely ignored due to an anti-1930s bias which emerged in the 1940s and 1950s and which continues to influence critical orthodoxy to this day. In his discussion of Upward's poems, letters, Montmere stories (co-authored with Christopher Isherwood) and his fiction and criticism from the 1930s, Kohlmann demonstrates that Upward, an ardent communist, was unable to find a style that mirrored his ideological certainty. Wavering between fantasy and prophecy, Upward's works "indicate the pervasiveness of the search for a literary style that would be capable of conveying the seriousness of political commitment, even when this preoccupation with the right kind of poetic voice could look like a holdover from an earlier, bourgeois era" (17). Kohlmann concludes that Upward was caught between his commitment to "historical particularity" and his desire to find "the vaster subtext of historical development", which created tonal ambiguities that indicate his thorough immersion in "the profoundly conflicted political commitments" of the decade (196).

All the writers discussed in *Committed Styles* – T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson, David Gascoyne, Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and Edward Upward – were to a greater or lesser extent subject to diverse and apparently conflicting impulses: "the wary anticipation of poetic disappointment and the refusal to settle into a kind of comfortable failure" (200). Their concerns about the politics of writing in the 1930s are indeed reflected in the current debates about the relationship between political commitment and literature.

Committed Styles is a scrupulously researched study of a period that seems both remote and close. Meticulously annotated and with an extensive bibliography, Kohlmann's study is invaluable for scholars of 1930s literature interested in the relationship between literary production, critical reflection and political activism. Each chapter is richly historicised and elegantly written. *Committed Styles* is a worthy contribution to the Oxford English monographs series and a fine complement to Kirsty Martin's *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy. Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence* (Oxford English Monographs, 2013).

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Martin Adam

Presentation Sentences (Syntax, Semantics and FSP)

Brno: Masaryk University, 2013

Martin Adam has been involved in the field of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) since the start of his academic and research career. He applies the Brno concept of FSP theory, drawing primarily on the approach developed by his teacher Jan Firbas. Adam has focused on the realization of FSP on the level of macrofields, with special attention paid

to religious texts. In recent years he has dedicated his research to the issue of Firbasian presentation scales, and he has published many studies on the topic. The monograph – with the simple but apt title *Presentation Sentences* – represents the most complex study on the issue of presentation scales published so far.

As mentioned above, this monograph draws on Adam's numerous studies of Firbasian presentation scales; it further develops and thoroughly elaborates the concept not only by expanding the range of texts analyzed (with respect to size as well as text types), but also, and most importantly, by considering various phenomena which help other FSP researchers view the concept of dynamic semantic scales from a more complex and precise perspective. He contributes to the body of knowledge on this issue not only by presenting a thorough picture of FSP, but also by viewing FSP via other more or less related approaches to information structure, such as the Prague concept of topic-focus articulation, Chafe's activation, or other linguistic approaches represented by e.g. Halliday or Quirk and Greenbaum. Since the type of a semantic scale is often determined by the verb it includes, Adam also considers a large number of approaches to the semantic and syntactic characteristics of a verbal construction, subsequently enabling him to select his own approach, suitable for an analysis based on FSP.

The main analytical parts of the monograph are based on the classification of Pr-sentences and the syntactic-semantic analysis of the Pr-verbs, the latter attracting the most attention. Nevertheless, the first topic, i.e. the classification of Pr-sentences, also offers several interesting conclusions. Adam proves that there may be significant differences in this regard between two different text types. The study reveals that the English narrative texts (in accordance with previous studies) prefer the end-focus of rhematic elements. This is an important notion, as linguists often emphasize the grammatically fixed word order in English against the functional (theme-rheme sequence) word order in Czech. Nevertheless, it should be understood that although it plays a grammatical role, the English word order also mostly follows the theme-rheme sequence (the SVO pattern generally follows the interpretative arrangement of the quality scale, which occurs in approximately 90 % of all distributional fields). It has generally been thought that the only exception to this theme-rheme sequence are presentation scale structures, although the existential construction *there+to be* also serve to shift the subject into the final position. Nonetheless, whereas Adam proved the existence of end-focus in narrative texts (meaning in presentation sentences), the religious texts demonstrate different tendencies. Mostly they prefer the rhematic subject in preverbal position, which, as Adam notes, is most probably due to the specificities arising from the literary style and the ideological character of the texts under scrutiny.

The second analytical part of the monograph deals with the verb, especially with respect to its ability to perform the function of the presentation (i.e. its ability to express the notion of existence or appearance of a rhematic subject on the scene). It has been proved that a verb performs a crucial role in the formation of a perspective; nevertheless, the verb's static (lexical) semantics are versatile enough to perform both quality and presentation functions if the dynamic semantics are taken into consideration. Adam presents the syntactic-semantic conditions under which the verbs are able to implicitly perform the function of presentation. To prove the scope of potentiality, he introduces the verbs

expressing presentation against the background of those expressing quality. The study then offers a thorough classification of the semantic classes of the verbs of presentation in the texts under investigation, and the author comments on their capacity to express existence/appearance either explicitly or with sufficient implicitness and on the potential disposition of individual types of presentation sentences to express existence/appearance on the scene. Adam demonstrates that the most usual verbs with the explicit capacity to express existence/appearance are those of appearance, motion and existence. Those which have an implicit capacity to express existence/appearance include those of emission or of animal sounds. Surprisingly, it appears that the verbs expressing existence/appearance explicitly form a minority; in fact, the verbs expressing existence/appearance implicitly slightly prevail. What seems to stand at the root of the verbs' ability to perform the function of presentation is the so-called subject-verb semantic affinity – not as a necessary condition but as a key factor that enables the non-presentation verb to perform the function of presentation.

There is no doubt that this study makes a significant contribution to the field of functional sentence theory since it offers a more complex picture of the ability of verbs to perform a presentation role than any other studies to date. Nevertheless, it leaves enough space for further investigation of the individual issues and poses several questions for further discussion. Although the topic may appear to interest mainly experts in FSP, I believe that it has plenty to offer also to linguists or students who are interested not only in FSP but also in the general syntactic/semantic characteristics of the verb as such. To conclude on a more personal note, I greatly appreciate the fact that we can now draw insights from another complex study on the issues of FSP – a study which deals with matters that have so far been touched upon only marginally, and which thus shines light on some of the more obscure corners of FSP theory and contributes another valuable piece to the mosaic of our knowledge.

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