

David Vichnar, PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:

re "*The Influence of James Joyce on Bohumil Hrabal:
Stylistic Experimentation and Epiphanies of the Everyday*"

by Zachariah Mullen
(MA dissertation, 2018)

Addressing the precarious issue of literary influence, Mr Mullen's thesis investigates the multiple ways, tangible as well as theoretical, in which James Joyce's texts served as sources of inspiration for Bohumil Hrabal's own poetics. It progresses from some tenuous but well-researched biographic connections (the Paris-Prague axis embodied by Adolf Hoffmeister, Joyce's involvement with *transition* and Hrabal's with Group 42) toward parallels in the epistemological foundations of their poetics ("epiphanies of the everyday"), their treatment of consciousness, their construction of narrative, and finally their writing and composition practices ("scissors-and-paste men").

Joyce's and Hrabal's problematic avant-garde credentials are usefully and satisfyingly contextualised by means of Renato Poggioli's fourfold "dialectic of movements". William James's famous coinage is read in original juxtaposition with André Breton's surrealist manifestos. Brought to bear upon their investigations of everydayness is Henri Lefebvre's critique of modernity. Mr Mullen's thesis is broad in both its literary scope—covering most of the Joyce & Hrabal canons—and its theoretical engagement. There is a range of Joyce scholarship (from Harry Levin and Richard Elman to Gary Leonard and Derek Attridge) and Hrabal criticism (Radko Pytlík, Jiří Holý, Václav Havel, Josef Škvorecký et al.) that informs Mr Mullen's own forays into the two author's oeuvres.

The argumentation is lucid and sticks to the point. Mr Mullen's close readings are always detailed, complex and well-argued, apt at synthesising or drawing parallels between texts whose similarities are far from evident. And yet, the treatment of *Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age* side by side with the textual weaving & unweaving of the "Penelope" episode, *I Served the King of England* in dialogue with the poetics of distraction in "Eumaeus", or *Too Loud a Solitude* coupled with the linguistic puzzling of "ALP", yields fresh interpretations of not only Hrabal's but also Joyce's texts.

The entire supervision process and reading of the finished product has been a pleasant and informative exercise for the supervisor who has gained a lot of insight into lesser-known areas of Hrabal scholarship. While the Joyce-related part of the thesis consists "merely" of rigorous and intelligent readings of several crucial *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* passages, the Hrabal half often presents first-time critical analyses of the author in the English language—Mr Mullen's excellent command of Czech even as difficult and

unusual as Hrabal's stands him in good stead—and is thus ground-breaking, original scholarship in its own right. I realise this thesis report has by now turned into a paean, but such is the matter at hand. By way of suggesting further research topics and stirring debate at the defence, let me raise the following three points:

1) What, at the end of the day, was Joyce's "influence" on Hrabal, a rather unfortunate word appearing in the title which the thesis is correct in tending to avoid otherwise? In the conclusion, Mr Mullen rightly concedes that while "studying influence may indeed result in finding direct overlaps, or lineage between two writers," with Joyce and Hrabal, one would be hard-pressed to find more than "a kindred spiritualness" (96). A strange term to use for Joyce the famously programmatic heretic and Hrabal the naïve pantheist (at best). Can we pin down and demarcate this "kindred spiritualness" somehow?

2) The next page implies that Joyce and Hrabal might also be connected through a deeper consideration of politics, and particularly in the vein of D&G's "minor literatures." Mr Mullen then states that "the discussion of politics was only briefly touched on out of respect for each author's pronouncements putting style at the forefront" (97). I don't think that's quite the whole story, however. Surely there's a world of difference between the profoundly political nature of Joyce's writing (and his lifelong socialist inclinations) and Hrabal's own political evasiveness and the marginality of political issues in his writing vis-à-vis Nazism and communism. Less piousness regarding personal hints and more critical rigour in reading this part of the Joyce/Hrabal intertext would be advisable.

3) Last but not least, what to make of the leftist, if not outspokenly Marxist, politics of the critical framework of the thesis itself? Lefebvre, Benjamin, Bakhtin, Barthes... the unacknowledged and untheorised leftist orientation of the thesis' conceptual framework remains its one most conspicuous ideological blind spot.

Overall, Mr Mullen's thesis presents a well-researched, original contribution to the scholarship on both James Joyce and especially Bohumil Hrabal, still so limited in the Anglophone context. This especially so since it is unafraid to ask basic questions of the vagaries of literary "influence" and go beyond the biographically anecdotal towards the conceptually poetic.

As such, I have no qualms in recommending it for the defence and propose a grade of *excellent – výborně. Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.*

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