

**Opponent's Report on the MA Thesis**  
**The Influence of James Joyce on Bohumil Hrabal: Stylistic Experimentation**  
**and Epiphanies of the Everyday**  
**by Zachariah Mullen**

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At first sight, this thesis appears as a very interesting attempt to compare two modernist writers using a general theoretical framework (Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*) and pointing out two important areas in which the resemblances among their works could be traced: "stylistic experimentation" and "epiphanies" glimpsed through the drabness of everyday life. On closer inspection, however, one finds more problematic aspects than expected. This is not so surprising given the fact that the thesis is a pioneering attempt at a comparative approach to Hrabal's and Joyce's writings. Listing some of these features, I will attempt to point out possible ways of improvement and further development of the approach.

1. Insufficiently elaborated methodology.

The thesis claims to use Poggioli's theory but it soon appears that Poggioli's conclusions, even when complemented and supported with the stimulating thoughts of the supervisor, cannot function otherwise than a basis of a very general methodological framework. In order to analyse "stylistic experimentation" of both authors, Bakhtin's dialogism is rather invoked than used: the thesis does not display any knowledge of Bakhtin's theory of style. Dialogism cannot be reduced to "an ongoing relationship between author and his character" as the quote from R.B. Kershner (cited from another secondary source, p. 51) seems to point out. It is a complex stylistic feature understandable only in view of the development of the novel as a specific genre, which Bakhtin outlines in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Due to the absence of the knowledge of Bakhtin's approach, the analysis of Joyce's and Hrabal's style has rather a "narratological" character, but, unfortunately, uninformed by any current narratological methodology. This is later confirmed in the analysis of *Ulysses*, where the "author-character" relationship changes into "discontinuity between character and role..." and dissolves entirely at the end of the sentence: "...between an authority and the audience, and also with language" (p. 56). Here the methodological uncertainty produces obscurity and confusion. Moreover, I am not sure whether Bakhtin's approach would be useful for interpreting Joyce's works, though it is definitely usable in analysing Hrabal's texts. Apart from Bakhtin, there are other and more suitable approaches, which are not even mentioned in the thesis. Since the thesis contrasts "communication" and "expression" ("what is the nature of expression?; how is that expression differentiated from communication?" p. 18), one has to wonder why Deleuze's expressive aesthetics has not been used, especially the analysis of style in *Proust and Signs* (Deleuze and Guattari are mentioned only once in relation to their notion of "minor literature", p. 98). This could perhaps be more productive than quoting secondary sources allegedly using Bakhtin.

2. Failure to systematically pursue the chief aim of the thesis, namely "the influence of James Joyce on Bohumil Hrabal" in "stylistic experimentation and epiphanies of the everyday".

The thesis mentions some analogies and rather remote resemblances (for instance on p. 9 it says that the fact that Joyce "was interested in certain 'roots' between [sic] the languages ... ties to Hrabal's metaphor of crossroads, an interconnectedness with language as well as in consciousness). This, I am afraid, does not substantiate any influence. The fact that the aim of the thesis has not been reached is admitted at the beginning of the Conclusion: "an *anecdotal* influence of Joyce on Hrabal, stemming

from *Hrabal's repeated mention of Joyce* in his pantheons" (p. 97; emphasis added). A few lines below the author states that "it has become *less an analysis of influence*, as it has become an analysis of shared approaches, values and purpose" (p. 97; emphasis added). Unfortunately this "sharing" has not been sufficiently proved. Rather, it has been vaguely asserted in the following statements: "making his own memories into something that comes to resemble the basis of Joyce's *Ulysses*..." (p. 65) or "Ditie comes to resemble Bloom in terms of their narration" (p. 68). The last quote contains a germ of a productive comparative approach, but remains a mere suggestion unsupported by textual analysis. The "similarities" between Joyce and Hrabal listed on p. 98 remain mere unsubstantiated conjectures, or, to see them more positively, suggestive epiphanies.

3. Insufficient attention to the differences between the works of Joyce and Hrabal. Joyce's approach to oral narrative significantly differs from Hrabal's *pábení* especially in the degree and quality of transformation of folk yarn: in contrast to Joyce, Hrabal creates a fiction of narrator's presence (as the quote from Gibian implies, p. 65), which is constantly undermined in *Ulysses*. Another underrated feature is the difference among metaphors and symbols in the works of both authors. While *Too Loud a Solitude* is distinguished by the centrality of apocalyptic symbolism (the wine press metaphors from the Old Testament used in the Revelation of St John developed into the "crushing of olives" metaphor in *Talmud*; p. 90), this cannot be said about *Ulysses* (where the apocalyptic references are not missing but do not have a central structuring role).
4. Lastly, the translations from Czech should have been done with more precision; they should be edited by a native speaker. There is a number of problems and sometimes even mistakes, as for instance in the case of the translation from Maxi Maryšková's book (p. 14), where "nedokonale" has become "perfect" which is the exact opposite. A consultation with a native speaker of Czech (for instance, the supervisor), would also help in dealing with an obscure conclusion made by David Short that the fragmented word "oby" implies "both" – "oba" (p. 89).

Evidently, the range and difficulty of the assumed task has been beyond the competences and time possibilities of the author. To make the main argument persuasive, he should spend more time designing a feasible methodology which would help him to identify not only resemblances but also contrasts among the works of both authors. Also, he should develop his comparison more systematically focusing first on style and then on the nature and function of epiphanies and everydayness in Joyce and Hrabal. Finally, he should limit the scope of the thesis to the comparison of more carefully chosen texts.

Although this report contains serious reservations, I do not think the grading should reflect the rigour of my criticism. As I have stated at the outset, this is a unique attempt at a comparison of two avant-garde writers which contains a number of ideas worth pursuing or developing. Because of that I recommend the thesis for the defence and propose the grade "velmi dobře" ("very good"), with the proviso that the final grade will depend on the performance of the author during the examination.

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