Although to many Joyce readers the juxtaposition of “Joyce” and “politics” still has a jarring, oxymoronic ring, more and more Joyce scholars in recent years have turned their attention to exploring the relationship between politics and the production and reception of Joyce’s work. Interest in the politics of and around Joyce’s work originates in two current and often complementary dispositions of Joyce criticism, the one toward a greater historical contextualization of Joyce studies, the other toward a desire to “locate” Joyce’s politics in some broad or specific ideological landscape that liberalizes or radicalizes Joyce, especially in contrast to his Modernist contemporaries.

Several essays and books in recent years have followed in the wake of Richard Ellmann’s and Dominic Manganiello’s pioneering research in the general area of Joyce’s political beliefs, including Robert Scholes’s “Joyce and Modernist Ideology,” G. J. Watson’s “The Politics of Ulysses,” Richard Brown’s James Joyce and Sexuality, and Franco Moretti’s Signs Taken for Wonders. In the effort to better situate Joyce’s work ideologically, most of these critics restore controversial aspects of Ulysses in particular that have been diminished in the process of canonization. The challenge to the critic-cum-cultural-archaeologist is to sift with fine tools for what constitutes satisfactory evidence in the portrait of our artist as a political man. The polemicists from the twenties and thirties who swung their cudgels over the text of Ulysses remind us today that the ideological decoding of a literary text is risky business. Particularly in the case of Joyce, “ideology” is not translatable into doctrine but is more a direction of mind and sensibility—nuanced, ambiva-
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lent, even self-contradictory. It is not decipherable by explicit ideas but by a panoply of aesthetic choices.

This, in a typically Joycean circumlocuitous manner, moves me to my broad subject, "Joyce and Political Correctness." My title refracts in several tantalizing directions, only one or two of which I'll be able to explore in this essay. My concern has been chiefly with the impact of politics on Joyce criticism, primarily American Joyce criticism, beginning with the cultural warfare among Stalinists, Trotskyists, and New Humanists in the twenties and thirties and continuing with the war hysteria of the early forties and the post-war ascension of the New Critics. The "political correctness" controversy began in earnest in the twenties and thirties, when the political consequences of cultural activity were debated more vigorously than ever before in our history. If we adopt Denis Donoghue's useful paradigm of cultural history, we may read the publication of *Ulysses* as a "cultural event" of major significance around which the "lore" of varied and contestatory critical responses followed. If I may paraphrase A. Walton Litz, the seventy year history of *Ulysses* criticism affords us the chance not to reach a "magisterial synthesis" of the novel but to understand what the book has meant in history.

Political controversies over *Ulysses* have crossed more borders than Joyce did, and my experience teaching as a Fulbright Lecturer at Charles University in Prague during 1991 and 1992 gave me a glimpse of what the novel endured behind what we used to call the Iron Curtain. I was able to trace a part of the novel's publication odyssey in pre-Velvet Revolution Czechoslovakia, from translator to publishing house to government bureaucracy to academic mediator. The struggle to publish a new translation of *Ulysses* in Czech in 1976 and 1977 is a fascinating story, one that lends a different perspective to the "political correctness" controversy that currently so absorbs us in America.

The authoritative Czech translation of *Ulysses* was completed in 1976 and published by Odeon publishers of Prague in 1977. (The first Czech translation of *Ulysses*—preceded only, remarkably enough, by the French and German translations—was a group effort and appeared in 1930.) At the time the Czech translation was completed (by Preložil Aloys Skoumal), the authorities at the Czech Ministry of Culture would not allow it to be published, citing the usual Marxist objections to Joyce's work: it was formalist rubbish, overly subjective, unconcerned with social problems; it was, in sum, the fruit of decadent bourgeois culture. Mirek Jindra, one of my colleagues on the Philosophical faculty at Charles University, was well aware of the objections of the authorities. When he was asked by Odeon to write an introduction that might placate the powers that be, he incorporated—with a degree of cunning Joyce himself would have admired—many of their objections into his argument for the novel's publication. His goal, as he recently explained to me, was simply to get this fine new translation of the novel into print. His method, he admitted, was to distract and mislead, while upholding the prejudices of the
authorities. He had to continually massage the egos of the petty bureaucrats who, with a simple phone call or stroke of the pen, could block the publication of a work that was ten years in the making. (Such intervention was usually accomplished with a phone call, Mirek told me. One never knew when the next purge—or, as it turned out, the unthought-of revolution—might occur, and it was always better not to leave fingerprints.) But before discussing Mirek’s method in detail, consider for a moment these excerpts from his introduction, which he kindly translated for me in Prague.

Jindra begins by quoting F. X. Salda, an eminent Czech writer and critic (not a Marxist) between the wars who previewed the first Czech translation of *Ulysses*, published in 1930, in his *Salda’s Diary* in 1929. He writes,

> [*Ulysses* is a great] Leviathan, a giant whale which has torn the nets of so many literary critics, the delusory monster which has attacked many other countries, and is now prepared to attack us aggressively next year.

Jindra goes on with his own commentary:

> *Ulysses* appears to be a literary boulder crushing, destructive, yet at the same time, devilishly tempting: a hardly digestable conundrum for a normal, average reader, and a disquieting problem for all those deeply involved in literary studies.

> To read *Ulysses*, that is to get into the book and understand it, is a task for long years, and nearly impossible. You may be reading a passage for the 5th or maybe the 20th time, and all of a sudden, you begin to feel you are penetrating Joyce’s microcosm. But on the next page, the author prepares a trap and kicks you out of his space into which, it seems, nobody is invited, and in which he doesn’t permit anybody to stand for very long. This universal subjectivism of the author may be the key sign of *Ulysses*. Joyce seems to forget that that which he lets out of his inner world in tremendous solipsistic associations will be read by somebody else.

> [The] 1st World War catastrophe, which reflected the inner contradictions of disintegrating capitalist society, added to [Joyce’s] perception of man as a creature forced into a sort of blind alley. He didn’t succeed in condensing out of the chaotic nebulae of the world of his time a new star which could help man see the further azimuth of his road. But he did succeed in shouting his deafening “Ecce Homo” from the moment of history to which he belonged.

> *Ulysses* is something which cannot be evaded; it must be respected. But we cannot accept the “ideology” of this book; this is not the ultimate way to write books. Even if there may be many reservations, even objections to *Ulysses*, we must take it as one of the milestones in the cultural history of mankind—even if we would try hard to get around it on our roads through the world of literature.

The syntax and reasoning of this last paragraph are tortured, full of reversals and qualifiers that loop back upon the assertions so tentatively offered earlier. Jindra’s praise of the novel is tepid, offered grudgingly, and, in the third sen-
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tence, deflated by its very generality (a "milestone in the cultural history of mankind"), then rescinded following the dash ("we would try hard to get around it"). Jindra's prose is continually looking over its shoulder; his juggling or balancing act is difficult to maintain here.

Mirek's strategy, evidently, was to express many reservations about *Ulysses*; to doff his cap in the direction of the standard Marxist objections to *Ulysses*, complaining of its subjectivism and of Joyce's inattentiveness to the reader (both of which complaints, by the way, were made by Edmund Wilson, and by others less sympathetic to the novel); to suggest that the novel was an aberration and a product of the late crisis of capitalism; to adopt a tone neither of sanction nor of dismissal, but of grudging tolerance; and to employ a kind of literary Doublespeak by making ambiguous statements that could be read two ways—or perhaps one way by simple-minded bureaucrats eager to seize upon the images offered specifically for their consumption. Thus, in the first quote, Jindra cites F. X. Salda in his 1929 reference to *Ulysses* as a "Leviathan," a "delusory monster . . . prepared to attack us aggressively." Salda's reference is ironic, of course: he suggests the monster of *Ulysses* is a delusion. But either the authorities didn't catch this, or, as Jindra suggested to me, they were so convinced of their own strength, and perhaps their own enlightened status as Czech Marxists nearly fifty years after the crude Stalinism of Salda's period, that they allowed the book to be published.

Planting an array of images and associations, Jindra works as artfully as Roger Ailes in discrediting his subject. *Ulysses* is conjured up as destructive, evil, elitist; it is more noise than sense, reflecting chaos, affirming nothing. In his masterstroke, Jindra deftly adds quotation marks around "ideology" in his final dismissal of *Ulysses*. The quotes flag the word "ideology" for the inattentive bureaucrat who will ultimately decide on the fate of the novel, and Jindra's conclusion ("we cannot accept the 'ideology' of this book") was no doubt pleasing. But the quotation marks have the additional effect of blunting the very attack Jindra appears to be making, by ironically suggesting that "ideology" is a construct rather than a natural or integral part of the text.

Although Jindra's presentation of the novel was, he can now admit, farcical and disingenuous, his intervention did, in fact, make it possible for *Ulysses* to be published in Prague. Jindra made a cameo appearance as *Ulysses* 'sly Czech fairy godmother, providing the gown the novel would need to dance in at the prince's ball. His efforts on behalf of the novel seem to me to be an almost parodic reenactment of other attacks on the novel before other audiences in other times and places. Like others before him, Jindra wrestled the leviathan of *Ulysses* into some satisfactory shape, bending to ideological pressures that have shaped so much twentieth-century cultural debate in the West as well as the East. The aura, if not always the text, of *Ulysses* has served historically as a site of political contestation. The objective of a good deal of *Ulysses* criticism, early and late, has been to legitimize Joyce, to give him the
stamp of political correctness, as that term has been variously defined by time and place and political circumstance.

It is one of the fascinating ironies in the critical history of Ulysses to discover that what often appears to be a hostile response to the novel may in fact be a defense of it (Jindra’s introduction), or at times may reflect a greater apprehension of what the text is about; and what appears to be praise for the novel may conceal appropriative or manipulative moves that do the text greater injustice. Viewed with some historical detachment, Jindra’s efforts on behalf of Ulysses were not in principle so different—not any less cagey—than Morris Ernst’s legal defense of the novel before Judge John M. Woolsey in U.S. District Court in 1933. However, the effect of efforts to at least legitimize or, in the work of later critics, to canonize Ulysses is that edges are sometimes smoothed, gaps and deletions occur. The “politically correct” Joyce, no matter what version that is or who sits in the court of judgment, leaves us always with an edited manuscript, and as readers and critics we are obliged to confess our sins of omission.

The term “political correctness” has been much bandied about lately, and we would do well to remember that the phrase is not a new one but originated in the twenties and thirties with the ascendancy of Stalinism and its encroachment internationally into many spheres of social and cultural life. Philip Rahv, for example, uses the term “correct politics” in his 1939 essay “Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy” to describe the American Communist Party’s efforts to produce an American proletarian literature, one in which, as Rahv explained, “a novel or a play was certified ‘revolutionary’ only when its political ideas—existing or latent—corresponded to those of the Party” (296). Of course, political litmus tests—then and now—were as likely to be administered to literature from the Right as from the Left, and Joyce’s work, along with that of other Modernists, suffered under the scrutiny of ideologues from both sides.

Perhaps in the spirit of Joycean perversity, what I would like to offer here is a celebration of the politically incorrect, at least insofar as that term was—and continues to be—loosely applied to Joyce’s work. In part, the inspiration for this essay was the comment of one of my colleagues at the University of California who, during a conversation about American stand-up comedians, sagely, surreptitiously, but allowing no opportunity for argument, confided that David Letterman was “not PC.” I was so startled by his comment that I could hardly form a reply. Later, I couldn’t help but think of Joyce and wondered how he—fresh, raw, absent his place in the canon—would have fared under the scrutiny of my colleague. Joyce and other Modernists had been savagely ridiculed and caricatured by Soviet and American ideologues on the Left during the twenties and thirties. Was I naive to assume that Stalinist cultural injunctions had passed with the thirties, or at least with Brezhnev?

Joyce himself has outlasted, if not transcended, simple-minded efforts to categorize his work ideologically. On the larger canvas of twentieth-century
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culture, Joyce's oeuvre may be viewed in three dimensions: as a cultural commodity, as a cultural problem, and most provocatively, as a cultural catalyst. Joyce's work exists simultaneously in these three dimensions. What sustains it, I believe, is its intractability and the implicit demands it makes upon the readers and the cultures that receive it. Because of its breadth and complexity, *Ulysses* resists pressures of cultural appropriation and critical exegesis. It exerts a counterpressure of its own, creating us as we create it, reading us as we read it. It makes us aware of our own limits and shortcomings as readers, our cultural predispositions and our political predilections. If we are persistent, energetic, and intellectually supple enough to negotiate our way to Ithaca and embrace Penelope, we find ourselves inefably altered, awed, imaginatively exhausted and exhilarated. It is in the difficulties of *Ulysses*—in its equivocations, its tensions, its modulations, and its ambiguities—that we find the pulse of the book. These warn us quietly, if persistently, of the dangers of coding and simplifying. "He had a mind so fine no idea could penetrate it," said T. S. Eliot of Henry James. I wish he had said it of Joyce.

At a time in our intellectual history when revolutionary and reactionary currents ran strong and polemics dominated literary discourse, Joyce moved against the illiberal spirit of his time. Joyce ushered in a post-ideological age, and his ideal reader was not one with an ideal insomnia so much as one who was not married to an idea. This is not to say his work lacks a value center or a moral dimension, but that the affirmations his work contains are always nuanced, circumscribed by comic irony, ambivalence, and evasion. Edmund Wilson heralded Joyce as "the great poet of a new phase of the human consciousness," a phase for which, we might add, applications are still being accepted.

Some might accuse me of having taken on the protective coloration of my temporary Eastern European home as I imply my own skepticism about the tendentiousness of some current criticism. My Czech colleagues and students are much warier than I about the deployment of generalizing theory in all spheres. After forty years of Doublespeak, Czechs are stubbornly empirical, relentlessly ironic, and reflexively mistrustful of "those big words that cause us so much pain." Recent polls assessing national moods, which included former Eastern Bloc countries in their surveys for the first time, concluded that the Czechs are the most pessimistic people in the world. Yet, out of that unlikely soil rises a reed of hope and faith, chastened by difficulty, and perhaps most eloquently expressed by that most self-effacing of politicians (so self-effacing that he recently resigned), Vaclav Havel. These lines are taken from a recent speech titled "The Post-Modern World Is Sick of Systems," which Havel delivered at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland:

> We are looking for new scientific recipes, new ideologies, new control systems, new institutions, new instruments to eliminate the dreadful consequences of previous recipes, ideologies, control systems, institutions and instruments.
Everything would seem to suggest that this is not the way to go. Man’s attitude to the world must be radically changed. We have to abandon the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved, a machine with instructions for use waiting to be discovered, a body of information to be fed into a computer.

It is my profound conviction that we have to release from the sphere of private whim such forces as a natural, unique and unrepeatable experience of the world, an elementary sense of justice, the ability to see things as others do, a sense of transcendental responsibility, archetypal wisdom, good taste, courage, compassion and faith in the importance of particular measures that do not aspire to be a universal key to salvation. Such forces must be rehabilitated.

Is it not both fitting and ironic that here, in this modest expression of faith born of and bounded by skepticism; in this extolling of civic virtue over messianic ambition; in this paradoxical grasp of the limits and powers of the human soul, we find something of the spirit of Joyce evoked?

APPENDIX


In December 1929, F. X. Salda’s *Notebook*, a rather prestigious literary journal of the inter-war period, brought out several pages where the author writes about the “Leviathan,” that “giant whale which has torn the nets of so many literary critics, the delusory monster which has attacked many other countries, and is now prepared to attack us aggressively next year.”

With admirable foresight, F. X. Salda has prepared his readers for the first Czech translation of *Ulysses*. It was prepared by Ladislav Vimietol and Jarmel Fastroeva and was published by the publishing house Petra in 1930, as the 3rd translation of *Ulysses* (German in 1922, French in 1929). Several decades have elapsed since, but even now, *Ulysses* appears to be a literary boulder crushing, destructive, yet at the same time, devilishly tempting: a hardly digestable conundrum for a normal, average reader, and a disquieting problem for all those deeply involved in literary studies. More than a half century after the work was written, it still irritates and provokes and becomes a starting point of new breakthroughs; it is still the object of devoted adoration and passionate condemnation. To read *Ulysses*, that is to get into the book and understand it, is a task for long years, and nearly impossible. You may be reading a passage for the 5th or maybe the 20th time, and all of a sudden, you begin to feel you are penetrating Joyce’s microcosm. But on the next page, the author prepares a trap and kicks you out of his space into which, it seems, nobody is invited, and in which he doesn’t permit anybody to stand for very long. This universal subjectivism.
of the author may be the key sign of Ulysses. Joyce seems to forget that that which he lets out of his inner world in tremendous solipsistic associations will be read by somebody else.

Maybe this is just the first impression because the other side of this ego-centric, precious coin of Joyce’s is represented by a cold-blooded, calculated basic intention to masterfully manipulate literary techniques and construction procedures to prepare the response which the work should provoke. Joyce wants to stand before the eyes of the enchanted audience an integrated model of the modern man with all the attributes in an apocalyptic dimension, the model of a modern man with his complicated inner life, consciously and unconsciously influenced by the disintegration of moral values and social values which have so far governed his fate.

We should not forget that Ulysses was written in the years of the 1st World War catastrophe, which reflected the inner contradictions of disintegrating capitalist society. Although Joyce seemingly ignored the war, we can't believe that it wouldn't be a shock to the soul of a man as sensitive as Joyce. Most probably, it added to his perception of man as a creature forced into a sort of blind alley. And so the evidence he has given about what the situation is may be historically limited. He didn't succeed in condensing out of the chaotic nebulae the world of his time a new star which could help man to show the further azimuth of his road. But he did succeed in shouting his deafening “Ecce Homo” from the moment of history to which he belonged.

Marxist literary history describes Joyce as the unique delineator of the disintegration of the values of bourgeois values at the beginning of the 20th century—an author who saw the antagonisms of capitalistic society surrounding him but didn't understand its course and rejected the new optimistic moments which were born in the beginning of the century. (Again, the formulation of Dmitri Ztomsky, the Soviet literary critic.)

... Each chapter of Ulysses corresponds to the main episodes of the Odyssey. The parodic sequences in Ulysses give some sort of irrational mysticism of the myth. A special dialectic of Joyce's figure is developed in this way, since Joyce's man is at the same time a beast and a victim of the beast, master and at the same time, slave.

Language is maybe the main character of Ulysses. Language seems to have an independent quality, reflecting a very free creativity which doesn't put any limits on the geyser of language fantasy, which doesn't put any taboos on the sexual sphere, or anywhere else, which doesn't respect normal syntax.

... This manipulation of language is going further and further, especially in FW.

The Czech translation is the fruition of deep study... it is one of the best translations of Ulysses in world literature.

E. M. Foerster said of Ulysses: “Ulysses is a simplification in the interests of Hell.” Compared with Picasso's model in the fine arts.

Ulysses is something which cannot be evaded; it must be respected. It provides material used by new generations of writers from around the world—France, USA, Russia, Japan. Even if there may be many reservations, even objections to Ulysses, we must take it as one of the milestones in the cultural history of mankind—even if we would try hard to get around it on our roads through the world of literature.
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