

# The Czech Reception of Irish Literature: the 1930s

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As this contribution is a follow-up to my study of the Czech reception of Irish literature until the 1930s (Grmela 1999), it seems appropriate to begin with a brief summary of that first study's contents. When giving an overview of the Czech response to Irish literature beginning in the 1800s, I pointed out the fact that most of the critical receptions of Irish literary works reflected several shortcomings characteristic of contemporaneous Czech cultural life. Apart from the shortcomings common to world-wide literary criticism in that period, such as a reliance on subjective impressions rather than on a particular theoretical framework, the Czech reception was largely marked by the provincial position of the Czech cultural scene surrounded, as a phrase of the time had it, by "a Germanic sea". This basically resulted in two countervailing tendencies. On the one hand, most of the information on Ireland and its literature, including the choice and the slant, came to this country through a "filter" of the relatively numerous German-language translations and periodical reports. However, at the same time, the local approach to Irish literature was increasingly coloured by the close connection of Czech cultural life with the ongoing renaissance of Czech ethnic identity asserting itself against the German preponderance. From this followed the frequent wish of the translators and reviewers to create and highlight a sort of analogy between Irish and Czech spiritual lives, both braving the overwhelming pressures of their respective imperial Big Brothers. It was no doubt this analogy that in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century facilitated the relatively high popularity in the Czech lands of Celtic mythology in general, and the contemporaneous Celtic Literary Revival with its patriotic overtone being particularly popular. While this tendency continued unabated into the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this period also began to see some more encompassing tendencies in the choice of the translated Irish works and authors. The two most noted Irish literary personalities that made their imprint on Czech cultural life in the 1910s and 1920s and who remained staples of the Czech theatre repertoire well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. Widely disparate as these two Dublin natives may have been, they certainly appealed to the Czech intellectual public through their commonly-shared "characteristic" Irish wit. However, due to their apparently modern, subversive tenor, they at least partly must have impressed different slices of the Czech intellectual public than were the champions of the Celtic Revival *literati*.

The rather distinct period of the 1920s (after the founding of an independent Czechoslovakia) saw a continuation of both tendencies. On the one hand, there was a veritable profusion of such Irish Revival authors as Synge or Yeats, no doubt appealing stronger to the more conservative, patriotic, and generally older section of the Czech population. On the other hand, the Czech stages and publishing houses were literally teeming with the works of Wilde, and especially Shaw, with their iconoclastic, and in Shaw's case openly socialist tendencies, engaging mostly the younger generation with its own prevalently irreverent attitude to 19<sup>th</sup> century pieties.

The arrival of the 1930s saw in a way a victory for the latter tendency. The old certainties, including the cultural certainties of the pre-World War I period so much shattered by the shock of the World War, seemed to have suffered the final blow in the economic crisis and in the ensuing polarization of much of Europe and the world in general into leftist and rightist totalitarian systems. At the same time, the inherited pre-war distrust of modernism, still potent in the Czech official cultural policies of the 1920s (Vočadlo 1975: 42, 181), had been virtually replaced by the official acceptance of modernist art (suffice it to mention the 1930s policies governing the granting of state prizes and other official awards). It may have been a mere freak coincidence, but it also may have been a reflection of the changing tenor of the time, that since their last publications in the late 1920s Yeats and Synge completely disappeared from the lists of new publications for more than a decade, or even for three decades respectively (Vančura 1964: 427, 438, 461, 464). But it is probably better to argue that it was the changed ambience of the turn of the 1920s into the 1930s that ushered in a veritable outpouring, albeit belated, of a whole spate of provocative English-language authors previously held to be ‘undesirable’ (Skoumal 1927: 177).<sup>1</sup> Looming large among these new avant-garde writers, including D. H. Lawrence, Hemingway, or Dos Passos, certainly the most thought-provoking, but for some also the most gall-provoking and baffling, was that expatriate Irish giant of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, James Joyce.<sup>2</sup> The publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1930 (still issued exclusively on the basis of subscription, due to, as the advertisement had it, ‘reasons of censorship’ (Joyce 1930a),<sup>3</sup> was in the same year followed by the Czech translation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Joyce 1930b), in 1932 by a sizeable excerpt from Joyce’s *Work in Progress* (under the title *Anna Livia Plurabella*) (Joyce 1932), and in 1933 by *Dubliners* (Joyce 1933). The positive aspect of this belated “discovery” of Joyce was not only that it appealed to a more receptive younger reading public free of pre-war cultural prejudices; but also its reception was now in the hands of a much more cultivated generation of literary critics than it would have been had these works been translated more promptly. Namely, by the early 1930s, there was a sufficient number of young and early middle-aged Czech literary critics whose attitude to art and life not only made them more open to the new challenges of modern art, but who were also widely acquainted with the contemporaneous science-oriented tendencies in literary scholarship of which Prague Structuralism was one of the focal points. Probably, the new openness of the Czech public to the more provocative modern art was further facilitated by the visibly growing professional quality of Czech translators from English, though, of course, the extremely high general standard of Czech post-World War II translations from English was in the 1930s still difficult to expect from a generation of translators for whom English was known only rarely and learned unsystematically.

However, the bitter criticism of the 27-year-old René Wellek of the poor professional qualities of a co-translator of Joyce’s first book published in Czech (Wellek 1934: 42),<sup>4</sup> was fortunately no longer warranted by the subsequent translations of the writer. In fact, the above-mentioned Czech rendering of *Anna Livia Plurabella*, was certainly one of the most remarkable translations from a foreign language ever undertaken in this country. While to this day it remains one of the very few attempts to translate Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* into any language, its daring and philosophical underpinning outlined in the Afterword by the chief of the three co-translators, Adolf Hoffmeister (Hoffmeister 1932),<sup>5</sup> still appeal to the much more sophisticated present-day Czech reader, as witnessed by the successful re-publication of the 1932 translation in 1996.<sup>6</sup> It is also probably not by chance that the philosophy of the three authors of the Czech rendering of 1932 (Marie Weatherallová, Vladimír Procházka, Adolf Hoffmeister) is virtually identical with the far more recent commentary by Michel Butor on the post-World War II attempt to render *Finnegans Wake* into French (Butor 1996): to paraphrase both Hoffmeister and Butor, neither of the translations was or could have been

a translation in the “proper” sense of the word. And just as the language of the original is not English “proper”, but rather a new language, in the words of Joyce, ‘a language of a river’ (Hoffmeister 1996: 83), the whole point of the rendering—if there was to be any point at all—was an attempt to catch the spirit and the music of Joyce’s work and to transpose it into a target language which again is a language different from any proper variety of the target language, not unlike an opera or a ballet transposing a literary work into the new language of music and movement. Measured from this point of view, the 1932 Czech version of *Finnegans Wake* represents one of the top creative performances in the whole history of Czech translation.

However, returning to the other Czech translations of Joyce’s works preceding his *Work in Progress*, it should be said that Joyce was generally lucky with his Czech readers. The not very satisfactory translation of *Ulysses* of 1930 notwithstanding, the book received spontaneous enthusiastic acclaim not only from mere “rank-and-file” partisans of the cause of modernism,<sup>7</sup> but also from no one less than the grand old man of Czech inter-war criticism F. X. Šalda (Šalda 1929: 146-151).<sup>8</sup> In his long essay on *Ulysses*, somewhat reminiscent of the sway of the book itself, Šalda correctly sensed that this was a milestone creation in the development of all modern literature. But at the same time, perhaps not surprisingly, Joyce elicited some embarrassment or negative response from far from benighted critics whose views were simply too deeply rooted in the values of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, e.g., the well-known Slovak reviewer of the time, known and valued highly also in Czech intellectual circles, Mária Štechová, developed her basically approving review of the 1931 Czech publication of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (‘an autobiographical novel, not yet quite destroying the form of the genre’, Štechová 1931: 129-130) into an open rejection of Joyce’s development after this novel. According to Štechová who sees Joyce’s weakness precisely in those aspects of his work which made Šalda enthusiastic,

the big novel [*Ulysses*] is a history of a mere one day and actually of only one man, onto which Joyce “glued” thousands and thousands of details, and let us admit that Joyce knows how to look at details [...] But does his so-called reality reveal the mystery of life? [...] I have not finished reading *Ulysses*. After all, this tiring novel is more documentary than pioneering. And no doubt it is interesting, like old Mephistopheles tormenting the good Dr. Faustus. (Štechová 1931: 129-130)

Was this or Prof. Vočadlo’s rejection of Joyce in the prestigious Otto’s Encyclopedia (Ottův slovník naučný nové doby—Dodatky) of 1933 (Vočadlo 1933: 1508-1509) after all stronger than the voices speaking in favour of Joyce, overwhelmingly on the political Left? At any rate, Joyce’s *Dubliners* published in Czech in 1933 was his last fiction to be published in Czech until 1959 when a new translation of *Dubliners* started the gradual “rehabilitation” (Joyce 1959) of the novelist silenced in Czechoslovakia for more than a quarter of a century. Was it that the early enthusiasm wore off so quickly as enthusiasm often does, or was it that it was rather based on wrong reasons, such as the oft-cited sexual scandalousness of *Ulysses* which inevitably had to lose its impact as the novel was followed by Czech translations of the far less provocative *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, or *Dubliners*? Perhaps there is no longer any traceable explanation for this abrupt silence, as there is apparently no convincing explanation for many other abrupt silences in Czech cultural history. Certainly there seems to be no convincing account for the conspicuous silence on Joyce on the part of a man of René Wellek’s stature following his marginal comment in connection with the translation of *Ulysses* in 1930.<sup>9</sup> Instead, choosing the last year of his stay in Prague, 1935, for publishing an approving review of Shaw’s *Saint Joan* (Wellek 1935a), a lengthy and sensitive

review of Oscar Wilde's life and work (Wellek 1935b), and a strikingly lengthy and enthusiastic review of the novel *The House of Gold* (Wellek 1935c) by Liam O'Flaherty (clearly a writer far less significant than Shaw, Wilde or Joyce), Wellek mentions Joyce only fleetingly in the latter as a 'writer of apocalyptic sobriety' (Wellek 1935c), while Wellek's world-famous post-World War II *Theory of Literature* appears to be even more conspicuous by its laconic treatment of Joyce's momentous contribution to the development of contemporary fiction.

Or rather was it that the long disappearance of Joyce's novels and short stories<sup>10</sup> from the Czech book market after 1933 was a matter of "extra-literary" (i.e. political and/or ideological) influences as it undoubtedly was for a long period beginning in the year 1939? Trying to answer this question might easily slip into pure guesswork. Still, it is worth reminding ourselves of a brief, yet significant report published in the pro-avant-garde but anti-Stalinist periodical *Listy pro umění a kritiku* of 1934:<sup>11</sup> 'The Czech writers who returned from the Congress of Soviet writers in Moscow<sup>12</sup> have published a special [publication] on their experiences at the Congress. Adolf Hoffmeister, one of the Czech participants in the Congress, and not so long ago a translator of James Joyce, apparently was in his element when he sketched his portraits of the Soviet dignitaries present at the Congress, including the one [Karl Radek] who condemned James Joyce as "a microscopic photographer of a dung-heap"'. Malicious as the tone of this article may have been, it is nonetheless relevant as one of the proofs of the uncanny tendency of pre-W-W-II Left-wing Czech intelligentsia to toe the official Soviet line of the day on just about any topic long before it became compulsory, culminating in a few years' time in the voluntary self-disbandment of the Czech surrealist avant-garde. This may very well be at least one of the answers to the enigma of the early disappearance of Joyce's fiction from the agenda of Czech translators in the second half of the 1930s in what turned out to be a prelude to more than two decades of an over-ideological, utilitarian attitude to literature in general. But just how this was reflected in the ongoing story of Irish literature in the Czech rendering, will be the subject for another study.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. also Skoumal's remark on Joyce's "nihilism" in Skoumal 1930: 490. Ironically, Aloys Skoumal was to become the first congenial Czech translator of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1976.
- <sup>2</sup> Actually, all three significant publications alerting the Czech public to the Joyce phenomenon appeared *before* the first Czech translation of Joyce, i.e. before the translation of *Ulysses* in 1930. Cf. Notes 7 and 8.
- <sup>3</sup> For the subscription basis see the ad in *Rozpravy Aventina V*, 1930-31, Prague, No. 4: 50.
- <sup>4</sup> According to Wellek, 'the translation (of Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*) by Jarmila Fastrová [...] is far from being good. The readers will probably not mind the frequent nonsense included into the translation by Fastrová—although in contrast to Joyce's *Ulysses*, equally poorly translated by her—Huxley is a completely lucid writer.'
- <sup>5</sup> The richness of this afterword would warrant a study of its own.
- <sup>6</sup> The 1996 re-publication of *Anna Livia Plurabella* was preceded in 1965 by its first re-publication as a part of the attempt of contemporaneous Czech Anglicists to "rehabilitate" even the most experimental part Joyce in the wake of the nascent ideological "thaw".
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. the impassioned but relatively superficial long review of *Ulysses* by Ivan Goll (Goll 1929), followed by the better informed introduction of Joyce to Czech intellectuals by Adolf Hoffmeister (Hoffmeister 1929).
- <sup>8</sup> Šalda's inspired analysis would, like the above-mentioned Hoffmeister study (Note 5), warrant a separate study.

<sup>9</sup> See Note 4.

<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, some of Joyce's poetry appeared randomly until 1948 (after which year a decade of silence veiled all of Joyce's "undesirable" work. All in all one of Joyce's poems appeared in the 1930s (see Joyce 1934 in Works Cited). Six of Joyce's poems were translated in the transitional period 1945-1948. However important some of these poems or some of their translators (such as Josef Čapek or František Hrubín), most of them were published in relatively marginal periodicals, and were thus practically unavailable to the general Czech reader. I am grateful for the bibliographical information on the Czech translations of Joyce's poetry in the above-mentioned period to Bohuslav Mánek who enabled me to see the Works Cited in his prepared study of the Czech reception of Irish literature to be published in Britain in 2003.

<sup>11</sup> An anonymous news item 'Our Surrealists in Moscow' in *Listy pro umění a kritiku* 2, 1934, Prague: 86.

<sup>12</sup> The Congress of Soviet writers in Moscow in 1934 was a truly momentous event in that it officially declared modernism an undesirable deviation, replacing it in the Soviet Union with the only "correct" attitude to artistic creation of any kind known as "socialist realism", marked among other remarkable features by its return to 19<sup>th</sup> century traditionalist techniques. While it automatically became mandatory for all Soviet writers, painters, composers, and even architects, those living outside the Soviet Union still had the choice to either accept it (as some did all over the world), or to reject it. Paradoxically, Hoffmeister, one of the leading Czech avant-garde writers, never publicly admitted after his return from the Congress to having any problem with accepting the new Soviet line.

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