James Joyce Literary Supplement

Volume 37 | Issue 1 Article 27

2024

The Uncanny Coincidences of the Russian Joyce

Bradley A. Gorski
Georgetown University

Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls
University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Joyce Literary Supplement by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation
Gorski, Bradley A. (2024) "The Uncanny Coincidences of the Russian Joyce," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*: Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 27.
Available at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol37/iss1/27

The Uncanny Coincidences of the Russian Joyce

JOSÉ VERGARA, *All Future Plunges to the Past: James Joyce in Russian Literature.*
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.
$57.95 hardback; $37.99 ebook.

Bradley A. Gorski

Something strange happens when you drop *Ulysses* into a Russian context. Dates begin to align in unexpected ways, and the history of Joyce's monument to modernism takes on new contours against the backdrop of the Soviet experiment in socialist modernity. When *Ulysses* was published in Paris, the New Economic Policy—a set of post-Revolution concessions to capitalism—had just launched in the Soviet Union. Markets were relatively open, and Western literature flooded in. At the same time, artistic experimentation and avant-garde exuberance were allowed, even embraced and supported, at times, by the young Soviet state. Bits of the novel were translated into Russian as early as 1925, and Joyce became the talk of revolutionary literary circles and the subject of literary criticism among those who had (and plenty who hadn't) read him. *Ulysses* was called a "devastating critique of bourgeois society" in official Soviet outlets (Cornwell 90). Its reputation at the time, as émigré writer Zinovy Zinik remembers, "was of a kind of avant-garde, anticapitalist, revolutionary" novel (186). Throughout its first decade, the novel was more accessible in the Soviet Union than it was in the Anglophone world. In the U.S., it was unprintable, indecent, profane, and pornographic, the "work of a disordered mind" (United States v One Book); in Russia it was merely untranslatable.

In the 1930s, things shifted. In both the U.S. and the USSR, the limits of the permissible were tested—and in both cases, what was at stake was literature itself. In the United States District Court of New York City, a somewhat absurd obscenity suit, in which the defendant was not a person or even a legal entity, but "One Book Called *Ulysses*," was decided in favor of the book, and a month later, in January 1934, *Ulysses* was, for the very first time, legally published in an English-speaking country. Just a few months later, the Soviet literati met in Moscow to discuss the future of Soviet literature. The 1934 All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers officially adopted Socialist Realism as the state-mandated aesthetic. But it also clearly cast modernist works such as *Ulysses* as anathema. By now, Joyce's experimental, formalist, individualist, iconoclastic prose was precisely the opposite of what Stalinism demanded. At the conference, the head of the International Information Bureau of the Central Committee, Karl Radek, called the book, "A pile of dung teeming with worms, photographed with a cinema apparatus through a microscope" [this is one of many lively quotes Vergara's wonderful book reproduces, see page 1]. The pessimistic naturalism of Joyce's autopsy of bourgeois society cut against the grain of the newly mandated optimism, which called for depicting society in its revolutionary development, rather than as it really was. Though Joyce could still be mentioned in literary debates—the ongoing polemic on the novel in the journal *Literary Critic*, which included contributions from György Lukács, serves as one prominent example—direct endorsements became dangerous. In 1935, Igor Romanovich, who had translated the first fragments of *Ulysses* a decade earlier, was arrested and later perished in the camps. Though reasons were never clear (or necessary) during Stalin's purges, Romanovich's widow claimed he was arrested because of his association with Joyce.

Thus, as soon as *Ulysses* could be safely bought and sold in the Anglophone world, it became dangerous in the Soviet Union. Moreover, in both societies, specifically this book at specifically this time became a fulcrum upon which broader questions of cultural permissibility tilted. Such odd correspondences may be nothing but coincidence. But for Joyce and many of his Russian contemporaries, nothing was mere accident. Such correspondences were history's missives, written in lines of fate, and to many Soviet writers, this language of historical coincidence pointed to the aborted possibilities of modernism, the riches of world culture just beyond their reach, and a literary history that could have gone differently. Perhaps for this reason, Joyce came to represent something more than himself for Soviet and Russian writers—an alternative, inaccessible mode of writing, of being, of thinking and creating. This alternative is at the heart of José Vergara's new book *All Future Plunges to the Past: James Joyce in Russian Literature*.

Though it is not the first book on Joyce in Russia—Neil Cornwell's *James Joyce and the Russians* (1992) and a handful of Russian-language monographs, most notably by Ekaterina Genieva and Joyce's translator Sergei Khoruzhii, provide essential background—Vergara's new book represents the most detailed tracing of Joyce's influence in Russian literature. It reveals Joyce lurking just beneath the surface of canonical works we thought we knew well. In five case studies—of Yury Olesha, Vladimir Nabokov, Andrei Bitov, Sasha Sokolov, and Mikhail Shishkin—Vergara argues that some of the most important works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Russian literature turned to Joyce, and especially *Ulysses*, as they grappled with questions of literary paternity.

Olesha, who publicly condemned Joyce in 1936 for his pessimism and naturalism, was actually under his profound influence. Even the terms of his condemnation, as Vergara shows, scream out for an ironic interpretation: "The artist should say to man: 'Yes, yes, yes,' but Joyce says: 'No, no, no.' 'Everything is bad on Earth,' says Joyce. And thus, all his brilliance is of no use to me," Olesha told the Moscow Union of Soviet Writers in 1936 (15). Of course, Joyce is associated with precisely the opposite of "No, no, no," a point which Olesha knew perfectly well, even if he hoped his audience never got to the end of *Ulysses*. In a similar reversal, far from "no use," Joyce's brilliance is actually key to understanding Olesha's great work *Envy* (1927). It is equally key to understanding Nabokov's final Russian work, *The Gift* (1938), which Vergara frames as a direct response to *Ulysses*. Nabokov in fact wrote to Joyce offering to translate the novel, but never received a response. Instead, he transposed its themes into his own great work about literary and biological fathers.

Nabokov had emigrated in 1921 and his Joycean reworking escaped Soviet politics, but many writers never left. Some even engaged with Joyce's legacy during the tumultuous Stalin years. Unfortunately, Vergara mostly skips over the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s within the Soviet Union proper. But he does mention some intriguing facts. For instance, Anna Akhmatova, the greatest poet of Stalin's repressions, read *Ulysses* in 1939. "'A remarkable book,'" she reported to a friend. "'I read it four times before I defeated it'" (74). She read it twice more the following year and incorporated some of its techniques into her *Poem without a Hero* (1940–62). *Ulysses* even gave her an epigraph, which she later dropped from her *Requiem* (1935–61): "'You cannot leave your mother an orphan'" (74). The mention of maternity suggests ways in which a female writer might counterbalance all the fathers and sons that populate this book. As it is, Vergara's case studies are all male authors coming to terms with biological and literary paternity. One wonders how an Akhmatova case study (or one on a contemporary writer such as Ludmila Ulitskaya, for instance, who has also discussed Joycean influences) might have complicated the gender dynamics of this influence study.

But no book can cover everything, and Vergara provides enough connective tissue between his case studies to point to intriguing pathways for future research. His next chapter picks up in the post-Stalin "thaw" era, when culture was liberalized, and the taboos surrounding Joyce lifted slightly. Though a published translation of *Ulysses* was still off-limits, Joyce reappeared in Mikhail Bakhtin's lectures in the late 1950s, and Genieva defended the first Soviet dissertation on Joyce in 1972. Thaw-

era writers also began to encounter Joyce through more acceptable intermediaries such as Sherwood Anderson. In his three post-Stalin case studies, Vergara convincingly shows how post-totalitarian literary history connects to major postmodernist innovations. After Stalin and even more so after the fall of the Soviet Union, a flood of texts previously inaccessible became available. In the post-Stalin moment, as Vergara argues, writers such as Bitov felt left out of modernism, behind in a literary historical sense, with no real hope of ever catching up. Bitov thematizes this historical belatedness in his novel *Pushkin House* (1964–71), which features a protagonist who becomes a literary critic after everything interesting has already been said. But his belatedness is complicated by the structure of the text, which loops back on itself, offering "versions of variants" of scenes already covered, refracting unified perception and simultaneously challenging the linearity of historical time (79).

The chapters on Sokolov and especially Shishkin argue that instead of questioning linear time and the need to catch up, late- and post-Soviet literature, with Joyce's help, found the stylistic means to overcome time altogether. They took their cue, at least in part, from literary history. For Shishkin, who came of age during perestroika, Joyce was a contemporary. The first full-length Russian translation of *Ulysses* appeared in 1989, and it immediately became part of the literary landscape along with all the repressed treasures of Russian and global modernism. It mattered less when something was written than when it appeared, and *Ulysses*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, and *Requiem* all became texts of the late 1980s. Shishkin's phantasmagoric *Maidenhair* (2006), in which times and places mix with uncanny seamlessness, was born of this literary synchronicity. Shishkin has said that his works take place "always and everywhere," and the turn of phrase is not an empty gesture toward timelessness (Kochetkova). It describes a carefully developed literary strategy that combines sources spanning more than two millennia of western literature into a rich tapestry that is emotionally poignant, metaphysically rich, and formally inventive. Vergara is especially good at close reading such complex works, picking apart their constituent elements, and tracing many of them convincingly back to Joyce.

Vergara's book ends on his own most Joycean section, an afterword on the contemporary lives and afterlives of Joyce in today's Russia. He visits a *Ulysses* reading group called the Territory of Slow Reading, he reconsiders the path of his own research, insisting on the centrality of a coherent literary history, and most affectingly, he curates a chorus of contemporary voices on Joyce and his influence. Vergara conducted interviews and email exchanges with more than a dozen contemporary writers, poets, artists, and critics about Joyce for this project, and instead of presenting them individually, he brings them together in a polyphony that spans some fifteen pages. The verbatim quotes, which range from a single sentence to several paragraphs, are presented without commentary, but are brought together in such a way that highlights subtle resonances. The format itself argues for Joyce's ongoing influence, and it even mounts a subtle challenge to the linearity of historical time and suggests a timeline bent by literary influence and twentieth-century politics. One of the interviewees recalled "a general sense of recognition and freedom" when she first encountered *Ulysses* (183). Joyce was both foreign and strangely familiar, a world closed off for decades by political vicissitudes, but at the same time still relevant, even pressing. "'Aha,'" she thought, "'this is my spiritual homeland'" (183).

As Vergara shows throughout *All Future Plunges to the Past*, that phantom homeland is not Joyce's Dublin, nor even the West more broadly construed, but rather the worlds of possibilities contained within experimental modernism. Within Russia, those possibilities were first welcomed as revolutionary, then forbidden, and apparently lost to time, before finally returning. But they have always been part of Russian literature and culture more broadly. As Russia enters yet another repressive stage of its history, it is more important than ever to keep that phantom homeland, and its revolutionary possibilities, in sight.

—*Georgetown University*

Works Cited

Cornwell, Neil. *James Joyce and the Russians*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.

Genieva, Ekaterina and Sergei Khoruzhii, eds. *"Russkaia odisseia" Dzhemsa Dzhoisa*. Moscow: Rudimo, 2005. [Not cited, but mentioned].

Kochetkova, Natal'ia. "Mikhail Shishkin: Roman vsegda umnee avtora," *Izvestia*, 12 February 2010. Web. Accessed 13 June 2024: http://izvestia.ru/news/358397

United States v. One Book Called *Ulysses*, 5 F. Supp. 182 (S.D.N.Y. 1933) https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=5544515174778878625&hl=en&as_sdt=40006

Vergara, José. *All Future Plunges to the Past: James Joyce in Russian Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021.