JAMES JOYCE AND “EASTERN EUROPE”:
AN INTRODUCTION

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For a major writer in the English language, James Joyce’s acquaintance with what for the moment we shall call “Eastern Europe” is exceptionally rich. For the fact that this relationship remains relatively little known, “[i]t seems”, as Joyce’s Haines would say in *Ulysses*, “history is to blame” (*U* 1.649) – or, more precisely, the long-standing isolation that followed from this region being assigned to the Eastern, Soviet-dominated side of the Iron Curtain after World War II. The much contested concept of “Eastern Europe”, whose definition has been at least as “variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning” (*FW* 118.22-3) as the many languages within its bounds, did not, of course, exist in Joyce’s time, arising ultimately as a result of the Cold War. In spite of this apparent anachronism, this term will here be used to indicate countries that belong geographically to Central, Southern or Eastern Europe, but were fated to fall under Soviet influence after World War II and were known for roughly four subsequent decades as the “Eastern Bloc”. Having lived between 1904 and 1915 in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Joyce had of course ample first-hand experience of a state which included territories belonging to and population deriving from several countries later subsumed under the category of “Eastern Europe” – Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Bohemia, Slovakia, as well as Serbia, Albania, Romania, Poland and Ukraine.¹

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¹ Although the term “Eastern Europe” is rather offensive for many inhabitants of these countries, I shall use it here in a neutral sense, and thus usually omit the otherwise richly deserved quotation marks henceforth. Given the complex and rather mutable political and ethnic make-up of the region in the past centuries, my list above is meant to indicate only the largest territories and populations.

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Although Joyce’s relationship with Eastern European cultures was rich and complex, scholarly explorations of these facets have been relatively meagre. The organizers and sponsors of the 2006 International James Joyce Symposium of Budapest and Szombathely, held for the first time ever behind what used to be called the Iron Curtain, very consciously tried to take a step towards remedying this omission. Bearing the theme of “Joycean Unions”, the symposium took place in a country that, with several other ex-Eastern Bloc countries, had acceded to membership of the European Union two years earlier. With the help of special grants, this conference attracted an unprecedented number of Eastern European scholars. This essay is inspired by and greatly indebted to their contributions. I was stimulated in particular by Marianna Gula’s analysis of the youthful Joyce’s response to “Ecce Homo” (1896), a monumental painting by the Hungarian painter Mihály Munkácsy (1844-1900), Arleen Ionescu’s discussion of Joycean influence in the fiction and criticism of the Romanian writer Ion Biberi (1904-1990), Tatjana Jukić’s exploration of the fate of Joycean “spectres” at the hand of the Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš (1935-1989) and his critics, and Ferenc Takács’s plenary on the Cyclopean resurgence of nationalism in the region.2

In what follows I shall attempt to give a sketch of three major aspects of Joyce’s interaction with the region. After briefly summarizing Joyce’s encounters with Eastern Europe, I shall discuss a number of common features in the fate of translations and critical responses to Joyce’s work in the region. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the workings of some fundamental Eastern European motifs and themes in Joyce’s oeuvre will be discussed. Although I draw on the work of many scholars, this introduction has a Hungarian emphasis. This is a natural result partly of Bloom’s Hungarian roots, partly of my own limitations. I shall, in particular, be using the figures of the Hungarian Mihály Munkácsy and the Yugoslav (Montenegrin-Serbian-Jewish-Hungarian) Danilo Kiš to make sense of some of

2 Marianna Gula’s paper is included in the present volume. Arleen Ionescu’s paper was called “Ion Biberi, Romanian Literature and Ulysses” and was read on 12 June 2006, just as Tatjana Jukić’s paper “‘A Sow that Eats her Farrow’: Joycean Genealogies for Danilo Kiš”. Ferenc Takács’s plenary was entitled “Százharminczbrojígulyás-Dugulás: Bloom, Hungary, and the Spectre of the Citizen Haunting Post-Communist Europe” and was delivered on Bloomsday 2006 in Szombathely.