

Go Not Thou about to Square the Circle : The Prague School in a Nutshell

In memoriam Frantisek W. Galan

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The Prague School (henceforth PS) is the established name for the international group of scholars in linguistics, literature, theatre, folklore, and general aesthetics organized as the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926 - 1948). In its origins, the PS was in part indebted to Russian formalism, especially the Moscow branch (the Moscow Linguistic Circle whose institutional name it echoed), and some of its members (Petr Bogatyrev, Roman Jakobson). At the same time, the PS had roots in both the Czech tradition of 19th-century Herbartian Formalism (Josef Durdik, Otakar Hostinsky) which conceived of the artistic work as a set of formal relations, and in some post-Herbartian developments in poetics and theatre (Otokar Zich). Among other schools of thought the PS was influenced by Saussurian linguistics, Husserl's Phenomenology, and Gestalt psychology. Such intellectual affinities were welcomed by the members of the PS, since they perceived their enterprise as the crystallization of the new scholarly paradigm for the humanities and social sciences which Jakobson christened *Structuralism* (Jakobson, 1929 : 11).

The history of the PS can be conveniently divided into three periods. The first begins with the establishment of the Circle in 1926 and continues until 1934. During this time, the research of the Structuralists was oriented toward the internal organization of poetic works, especially their sound stratum. Roman Jakobson's and Jan Mukarovsky's histories of old and modern Czech metrics are the most representative works of this phase.

The subsequent period (1934 to 1938) opens with Mukarovsky's study of a little-known Czech poet of the early 19th century, Milota Zdirad Polak, and ends with the Circle's collective volume devoted to the leading Czech Romantic, Karel Hynek Macha. In this period, the PS transcended its immanent orientation toward literary history : the semiotic concept of a literary work rendered it a social fact (i.e., a sign understood by the members of a given collectivity) and enabled the Structuralists to relate the developmental changes in literary history to all other aspects of human culture. Simultaneously, PS schoars extended poetics into aesthetics, shifting from a concern with verbal art alone to a concern with all the arts and with extra-artistic aesthetics as well.

The last period, roughly from 1938 to 1948, is delimited by external interventions. The German invasion forced some members of the PS to leave Czechoslovakia (Bogatyrev, Jakobson, Rene Wellek) and severed the international contacts of the Circle; the Communist takeover ten years later effectively banned the Structuralist study of art and eventually led to the disbanding of the Circle. However, the first blow was mitigated by an influx of junior members into the Circle : the literary historian Felix Vodicka, the student of dramatic art Jiri Veltrusky, and the musicologist Antonin Sychra, among others. During this final stage the research of the PS shifted toward the subjects involved in artistic process (the author and the perceiver). Vodicka's systematic attempt to elaborate the history of literary reception is among the most promising developments of this period.

In the post-War years, the intellectual heritage of the PS was disseminated throughout the world by those members who left Prague. The Structuralist revolution of the 1960s in France and the United States was to a considerable degree stimulated by Roman Jakobson, who in the 1940s helped to establish the Linguistic Circle of New York, of which the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss was a member. Petr Bogatyrev, who returned to the Soviet Union after the outbreak of the war, performed a similar role there. A group of young literary scholars (Miroslav Cervenka, Lubomir Dolezel, Mojmir Grygar, Milan Jankovic) attempted a resurrection of the PS in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, but the Soviet invasion of 1968 dealt it a final blow.

For the PS, Structuralism was a dialectic synthesis of the two global paradigms dominating European thought in the 19th century : Romanticism and Positivism. "European Romantic scholarship", Jakobson observed in 1935, "was an attempt at a general, *global* conception of the universe. The antithesis of Romantic scholarship was the sacrifice of unity for the opportunity to collect the richest factual material, to gain the most varied partial *truth* " (Jakobson, 1935 : 110). Structuralism, the Prague scholars argued, would avoid the one-sidedness of its predecessors by being neither a totalizing philosophical system nor a narrow concrete science. " Structuralism", as Mukarovsky put it, "is a scholarly attitude that proceeds from the knowledge of the unceasing interaction of science and philosophy. I say 'attitude' in order to avoid terms such as 'theory' or 'method.' 'Theory' suggests a fixed body of knowledge, 'method' an equally homogenized and unchangeable set of working rules. Structuralism is neither—it is an epistemological stance from which particular working rules and knowledge follow, to be sure, but which exists independently of them and is, therefore, capable of development in both these aspects" (Mukarovsky, 1941 :13-14). What characterizes the Prague version of Structuralism from other trends claiming that label is its conceptual frame formed by the interplay of three complementary notions—structure, function and sign.

Structure

The concept of structure, which gave the paradigm its name, requires special attention. In the parlance of the PS, it referred to what might be seen as two distinct entities. On the one hand, it denoted the holistic organization of a single work as a hierarchical system of dominant and subordinated elements. But in the same way as Ferdinand de Saussure recognized that every concrete utterance (*parole*) is meaningful only against the background of the collectively shared linguistic code (*langue*), the Prague saw every individual work as an implementation of a particular aesthetic code—a set of artistic norms. These they also termed a structure.

In contrast to Saussure, however, the PS did not believe that any code (whether linguistic or aesthetic) is exclusively synchronic and existing in and of itself. Concerned with literary change, the Structuralists advanced three different models for its description. The earliest emulated to a considerable degree the immanent orientation of Russian Formalism according to which the literary series develops because of its intrinsic need for de-automatization (*aktualisace*). But the limitations of this approach soon became apparent. Poetry does not exist in a social vacuum, Mukarovsky recognized in 1934, "The developmental series of individual structures changing in time (e.g., political, economic, ideological, literary) do not run parallel to each other without contact. On the contrary, they are elements of a structure of a higher order and this structure of structures has its hierarchy and its dominant element (the prevailing series)" (Mukarovsky, 1934 ; 60). The immanent study of literary change was thus augmented by consideration of its external context. The historical trajectory of literature was seen as determined simultaneously by the purely literary needs and the external impulses stemming from social developments.

Despite their differences, the immanent and extrinsic models of literary change describe history from the same vantage point : that of its production. But this perspective is clearly insufficient to explain the becoming of a text solely as a function of the context that generated it, as Vodicka observed in the early 1940s, "Only if read does the work achieve its aesthetic realization [and] become an aesthetic object in the reader's consciousness" (Vodicka, 1942 ; 371). The history of literary reception proposed by Vodicka relativizes considerably the bond between the text and the underlying literary code which provides it with identity. Any work can potentially be reconstituted according to reading conventions that did not exist during its inception and, in this way, assume new and unpredictable appearances.

Function

The second key concept and the trademark of Prague Structuralism was function. Rooted in a purposive view of human behavior, it designated "the active relation

between an object and the goal for which this object is used" (Mukarovsky, 1971 : 17). The PS stressed the social dimension of functionality, the necessary consensus among the members of a collectivity concerning the purpose that an object serves and its utility for such a purpose. From the functional perspective, every individual structure mentioned above (political, economic, etc.) appeared as a set of social norms regulating the attainment of values in these cultural spheres.

Within the functional typology proposed by the Structuralists, the aesthetic function played a special *role*. It might be said that this function was the dialectical negation of functionality in general. Whereas in "practical" functions the *telos* lies outside the object used, in the aesthetic function the *telos* is this object. That is to say, in extra-artistic activities functional objects are instruments whose value stems from their suitability for particular purposes. Works of art, on the other hand, as objects of the aesthetic function, do not serve any practical goal directly and thus constitute ultimate values in and of themselves.

However, the Structuralists did not believe that an artistic work is completely severed from its social context. The PS conceived of an object's functionality in terms of hierarchy rather than mutual exclusivity : the dominance of the aesthetic function does not preclude the presence of other functions. Though unrealized, practical functions do not vanish from the work; they remain there in all their potentiality, merely shifting their corresponding values to a different level. The transformation that extra-aesthetic values undergo in art depends on another component of the Structuralist frame of reference—the sign.

Sign

" *The problem of the sign*, " the members of the Circle declared in their joint manifesto of 1935, " is one of the most urgent philosophical problems of the cultural re-birth of our time" because " all of reality, from sensory perception to the most abstract mental constructions, appears to modern man as a vast and complex realm of signs" (Havranek, 1935 :5). As mentioned above, the PS classified all artifacts according to the functions they serve. However, man-made objects do not merely carry out their functions (i.e., a house protecting us from the weather) but also signify them (a house as a sign of civilization). A conjunction of material vehicle and immaterial meaning, the sign reinscribes in different terms the dual nature of structure—its physical embodiment in individual artifacts and its mental, socially shared existence as a normative code. From a semiotic perspective, then, culture appears as a complex interaction of signs mediating among the members of a particular collectivity.

At this point we might return to extra-aesthetic functions in art whose appurtenant values are not realized because of a dominant aesthetic function. But since an artistic work is also a sign, these unrealized values are transferred from an empirical to a semantic plane. they become partial meanings which contribute to the total semantic structure of the work. Thus, "from the most abstract point of view, "Mukarovsky wrote in 1936, " the work of art is nothing but a particular set of extra-aesthetic values. The material components of the artistic artifact and the way they are exploited as formal devices are mere conductors of energy represented by extra-aesthetic values. If at this point we ask ourselves where aesthetic value lies, we find that it has dissolved into individual extra-aesthetic values and is nothing but a general term for the dynamic totality of their interrelations " (Mukarovsky, 1936 : 69).

Poetic language

Despite the breadth of their research interests, the members of the PS devoted most of their attention to the study of literature. Following the path charted by the Russian Formalists, they approached verbal art from a linguistic perspective, treating it as a particular functional dialect—poetic language. The Circle's "theses" of 1929 presented such dialects as a series of binary oppositions : internal vs. external, intellectual vs. emotional, poetic vs. communicative (the latter subdivided into practical vs. theoretical), etc. Though in subsequent years the structuralists further elaborated, augmented and terminologically modified this typology, the basic characteristics of poetic dialect remained the same. As a realization of the aesthetic function in linguistic material, it transforms the verbal sign from an instrument for signifying other, extra-linguistic realities to a self-centred composition.

The most obvious manifestation of the aesthetic function in language is the hypertrophy of the signifier—the striking organization of linguistic sound, especially in poetry. The entire range of phonic features, which in messages governed by other functions serve as an automatized vehicle of meaning, are arranged in poetic language so as to call attention to themselves, turning thus from a means toward something else into their own ends. Consequently, the PS investigated closely the problems of sound orchestration, prosody, and intonation in poetic compositions. The distinctive feature of these inquiries was their phonological basis. That is, for the Prague Structuralists only those phonic elements of language capable of differentiating cognitive meanings could be exploited poetically. By the same token, the PS regarded the sound configurations permeating the poetic work (including meter) not as mere formal constructs but as partial semantic structures comprising the overall meaning of the text.

The foregrounding of the *phone* in a poetic composition disrupts the process of linguistic designation the matching of signifiers with signifieds to produce meaning

—and results in the heightened polysemy of verbal art. To explain this point, let me introduce the PS model of linguistic designation formulated in 1929 by Saussure's student, Sergej Karcevskij. According to it, every language use is a struggle between the "psychological" meaning the speaker wishes to express and the "ideological" meanings imposed by the system. Linguistic designation, then, involves two antithetical tendencies. The signifier and the signified can be matched in a way the speaker sees as adequate to the particular context or as adequate to socially shared linguistic conventions. The tension between these two tendencies results in the homonymic /synonymic extension of the word: the asymmetric dualism of sound and meaning. This is to say, every application of a linguistic sign necessarily implies other possible applications of the same sign in different contexts (homonymity) as well as the existence of applicable, but in this case not applied, alternative signs (synonymity). "The signifier (sound) and the signified (function) slide continually on the "Slope of reality". Each overflows the boundaries assigned to it by the other: the signifier tries to have functions other than its own; the signified tries to be expressed by means other than its sign. They are asymmetrical; coupled, they exist in a state of unstable equilibrium" (Karcevskij, 1929; 93)

The aesthetic manipulation of sound in verbal art intensifies the semantic slippage of linguistic signs. The dissolution of the signifier into its constitutive elements and their regrouping according to a particular phonic prescript provides language with a new net work of signifying possibilities; a different ground on which sound and meaning can meet. Yet, by problematizing the process of verbal representation, according to the PS, poetic language performs a signal role in the linguistic system. In contrast to some other functional dialects that stress the total adequacy of signs to what they stand for and strive to obliterate their differences, poetic language underscores the reciprocal inadequacy of the two, their deep-seated non-identity. But "why is it necessary to point out that the sign does not merge with the object [it signifies]?" Jakobson asked in 1934, "Because besides the immediate awareness of the identity between the sign and object (A is A_1) we need the immediate awareness of the lack of this identity (A is not A_1)". "This antinomy is necessary", Jakobson continued, "for without contradictions there is no mobility of concepts, the relation between concept and sign becomes automatized, activity stops, the awareness of reality dies out" (Jakobson, 1934: 234).

The maximal, extension of signs in verbal art, however, was still insufficient criterion to distinguish poetic language from other functional dialects. Emotive designations (curses, endearments), Mukarovskij insisted, demonstrate an equal if not higher tendency toward semantic novelty; yet, their purpose is clearly not aesthetic. The specificity of poetic language vis-à-vis its emotive counterpart, therefore, cannot be sought solely in the act of designation but in another fundamental

linguistic operation: the process of combining signs into higher linguistic operation: the process of combining signs into higher linguistic units .

The difference between linguistic designation and combination corresponds to another basic semiotic dichotomy discussed by the PS , between arbitrary and motivated signs. " Language , " Karcevskij paraphrased Saussure in 1927 , " always offers the spectacle of battle between lexicology (the tendency toward the arbitrary and phonological sign) and syntagmatics (the tendency toward the ' motivated ' and morphological sign) " (Karcevskij , 1927 ; 15) . The possibility of homonymic /synonymic slippage is predicated upon the essential arbitrariness of the link between the signifier and signified ; anything can be designated by any word , and vice versa. The conventionality of the linguistic system provides this flux with social limits , but in itself is incapable of stopping it because the individual sign user may always violate these limits in the name of "psychological adequacy . " Given this fact, it is not surprising that emotive language charged with the task of intimating a speaker's mental state strives toward the pole of lexicological arbitrariness.

Though poetic and emotive languages share a propensity for semantic shifts , they differ in regard to arbitrariness. For the PS , verbal art was the prime example of syntagmatically motivated signs . Since the aesthetic function transforms language from an instrument for signifying something else into a self --centered sign , the meaning of poetic designation is not a function of the external context but of the internal contexture of the utterance. This fact results from the complexity and systematic organization of the poetic text at all levels : the series of phonological , morphological, and syntactic parallelisms, and the hierarchical correlations among partial signs create what the Structuralists termed the work's "Semantic gesture " --- --- the grid of formal possibilities that motivates the overall meaning of the literary sign. It is the relational properties of the signifier, the interactions among its partial signs which create the structure of its signified , the work's semantic universe . Therefore , in transgressing linguistic conventionality, poetic language does not slide toward the pole of arbitrariness .Instead , each work generates from within its own textual conventions, a paradigm of intersubjective expectations which suggest its interpretation .

The essays written for this issue approach the rich intellectual heritage of the PS from a variety of perspectives. Since the Structuralist revolution inaugurated by the Prague Circle marked a decisive turn in the history of the humanities and the social sciences, some of authors investigate the broad cultural setting which facilitated this change. . Jindrich Toman's comprehensive " Notes on the Emergence of the Prague Circle " applies Mukarovsky 's thesis about the intrinsic interdependence among different branches of human endeavors within a cultural context to the PS

itself. Structuralist thought, Toman illustrates convincingly, was not informed solely by professional, academic pursuits but also by the socio-political factors of the milieu in which it originated. To prove his point, he appends to this volume Jakobson's polemical essay from 1925 that, from a Structuralist position, rallies against the arid and reductionist poetics of so-called "proletarian literature" promulgated at that time by the Czech communists.

Milan Palec next reiterates the imperative to study the PS in the interwar Czech culture. Theory, without a corresponding artistic praxis, is empty; and praxis without such a theory is blind. Drawing on a complex symbiosis between Structuralist aesthetics and the Czech avantgarde theatre, Palec demonstrates the mutual benefits both parties derived from their complementarity.

The three contributions which follow treat the history of the PS in a more restricted manner, within the boundaries of traditional disciplinary matrices. My own piece posits a robust theoretical affinity between the tenets of Structural linguistics and the phenomenology of language outlined by the Russian pupil of Husserl, Gustav Shpet. Without glossing over their differences, I see their two stances as fellows-in-arms in the common struggle against the atomism, psychologism, and individualism of the positivistic paradigm. The PS and the Russian philosopher shared the conviction that language must be analyzed in structural, semiotic, and teleological terms.

But not all encounters between the PS and philosophy, Kei Yamanaka's study cautions, were so harmonious. It casts sharp light on a curious intellectual cross-pollination which occurred after the War when Roman Jakobson incorporated into Structuralist semiotics Charles S. Peirce's typology of signs. After exploring Jakobson's motivations for intertwining these disparate traditions, Yamanaka finds them deeply incompatible and deems Jakobson's valiant efforts an ultimate failure.

Finally, the leading Czech prosodist Miroslav Cervenka retraces the torturous path along which phonology entered the Structuralist literary studies. By discovering an intrinsic bond between linguistic sound and meaning, phonology furnished metrics with a firm basis for separating essential prosodic features from rhythmic epiphenomena. But—and this is the gist of Cervenka's essay—the students of verbal art are yet to fully explore the heuristic potential of phonology, especially in regard to the vexing issue of syntactic intonation.

The PS, however, need not be tackled as a mere historical event, interesting only to those who, as the proverb goes, do not wish to repeat the mistakes of the past. The next four essays attempt to insert Structuralist ideas into current theoretical discussions. Hana Arie Gaifman tells us that the concept of dominant, which in PS parlance referred to the hierarchical organization of the artistic whole, has a very

specific meaning in the study of music. By applying it metaphorically to the field of literature, she offers an original inter--- artistic model for describing the dynamics of literary change .

" Belated Meetings " by Wendy Holmes painstakingly maps all the recent encounters between the PS and Anglo ---American /French art history. The stumbling block which prevents these engagements from being fruitful is , according to Holmes, the different developmental trajectories of the Czech and West --- intellectual traditions. The made ---in ---Prague version of Structuralist with , social and historical awareness fits ill the discourse of contemporary art historians whose universe is circumscribed by all too abstract polemics between the French Structuralists and post---Structuralists.

If spurned by the Western scholars who have reappropriated the label of Structuralism for their own ends , the PS might as well look for friends elsewhere. And this is where Michael Sprinker's tightly argued paper comes in: it is precisely the socio--- historical ramifications of its literary theory which align the PS with the Marxist critique of ideology exemplified by the writings of Louis Althusser .

Finally , David Herman's dense and complex contribution positions the PS functionalism within the ongoing debates about the pragmatic dimension of semiosis. He takes issue with the claim made by Mary Pratt ---a prominent practitioner of speech act theory in literary studies --- --- that the Structuralist notion of poetic language separates literature from its social setting . Pratt's critique , Herman shows, focuses narrowly on the typology of functions without taking into account the metapragmatic rules for its use advanced by the members of the Circle . Not only did the PS conceive of all linguistic structures (poetic included) as a relative hierarchy of many functions but , more importantly , they always maintained that any such hierarchy is valid solely in a concrete cultural situation. It is not the PS, Herman charges, but Pratt herself who fails to stipulate the metapragmatic rules of discourse and turns a blind eye to the enormous versatility of utterances in space and time.

To familiarize readers with some important commentaries on the PS, Miroslav Cervenka and Michael Holquist reviewed two books related to the topic. A collective volume by thirty ---four scholars from many countries --- *Roman Jakobson : Echoes of His Scholarship* is a telling homage to the man who was a friend of the Russian Futurists, Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky , in the teens ; a founding member and the vice ---chairman of the Prague Circle in the twenties and the thirties; a mentor to Levi--Strauss in the forties; and the dean of American Slavistics from the fifties until his death in 1982 . " Only with difficulty" , Cervenka concludes his report, "can one imagine the magnitude of the problems with which a future 'biographer

'of Jakobson will have grapple," But , as this collection attests, it will be an exciting venture.

Holquist's review article of Striedter's recent account of Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism deals with a morestreamlined narrative. Striedter's admirable goal was not merely to provide a history of Slavic literary theory but to show its relevancy for contemporary American criticism. In a friendly manner, Holquist points out the difficulties which such a project entails. But given the changing nature of literary studies in the USA and the collapse of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe which for decades hindered the free flow of ideas , Striedter's initiative , Holquist concedes , could not come at a more opportune moment.

My brief , all too brief, rendition of the contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* devoted to the PS does not do justice to the breadth of knowledge and sophistication of their authors nor to their oft polemical ardor. Nevertheless, it is my strong hope that the essays gathered here will attract a distant audience to a significant strain of the continental theorizing which, I believe, merits serious consideration.

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