

# Roman Jakobson on Modern Czech Poetry, 1925

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"There' is a kind of exercise book that consists of mathematical problems arranged in a numbered series. Some problems involve equations with one unknown, later come problems involving equations of the second degree. At the back of the book the answers are listed in a numbered column:

4835	5 rams
4836	17 faucets
4837	13 days
4838	1000 herrings

Woe to him who sets out to learn mathematics by going straight to the answers and trying to make sense of that neat column. What's important are the problems, the working out of their solutions, not the answers in and of themselves.

In this very situation of a person who, wishing to learn mathematics, studies columns of answers, are those theoreticians who, in works of art, concern themselves with ideas, with deductions, and ignore the construction of those works.

This is what goes on in their heads:

Romantics	=	religious exaltation
Dostoevsky	=	seeking after God
Rožanov	=	the question of sex
at 18	=	religious exaltation
at 19	=	seeking after God
at 20	=	the question of sex
at 21	=	resettlement to northern Siberia

Woe to the writer who attempts to promote the value of his work, not by refining its mode of operation, but via the magnitude of the "answer" to the problem he has set himself. As if problem 4833 were somehow greater and more important than problem 4837 because the number 13 stands in one answer whereas the other answer has '1000 herrings.' They are merely two problems, and both of them for high school juniors."<sup>1</sup>

Thus for Viktor Shklovsky, my friend and comrade in a new field of scholarship. I happened to recall the above lines when I read the following endearing pronouncement in the magazine *Reflektor*<sup>2</sup> under the heading "proletarian column" : "We have basically nothing against a puzzle section and would gladly use contributions to it. Of course, one must make such puzzles beneficial for our worker readership by having the solutions present some truth useful to the proletariat".

How typical of the editor-in-chief of the magazine, the venerable Stanislav K. Neumann!<sup>3</sup> It's just like him to contemplate imprinting a puzzle with the motto about the proletarians of all countries. Just like him to do that, he who goes to such impressive pains to stitch the editorials of *Rude Pravo*<sup>5</sup> with Vrchlicky's rhymes<sup>5</sup> and to break them down into rhythmicized (albeit carelessly done) lines of verse devoutly believing he is making revolutionary poetry. He puts together a proletarian cross-word puzzle, transforms Dolezal's article into a tender lyric poem, contentedly sips coffee with rum from a cup with a flower design and happily naps on a cushion embroidered by a careful hand-- not with the words "Fifteen minutes only" (that would be petty-bourgeois), but with the words "Honor work!" I do not mean to cast aspersions on his meritorious gray hairs. But we do not want to repeat, and will not repeat, the mistakes of old men brought up on the knowledge and aesthetic habits of the late nineteenth century.

To make it clear and concise :the linguistics of the second half of the last century, in its inquiry into the phenomena of language ,asked the question "How did they come about?" and largely ignored the question "What were they for?" Yet the most elementary language consciousness inevitably asks the question about problems, about goals. I am listening to someone speak and I ask "What are you telling me this for?" and the speaker can answer "If I speak, then I know what for." This "what for" of every act of speech-- that is, its task-- is clear both to the speaker and to the listener, as long as the one understands the other. Language, according to the apt definition of contemporary French linguists, is a system of conventional values just like a deck of cards and it is thus wrong to analyze of language without regard for the multitude of possible tasks outside of which no such system actually exists. A general conception of language is a fiction. Just as there are no laws of a card game in general-- equally applicable to black jack, poker and to building a house of cards-- so, by the same token, linguistic laws can be established only for a system determined by a specific task. Nineteenth century scholarship was not concerned with these problems; and the few sporadic attempts to take language function into consideration turned out to be unhelpful inasmuch as the multitude of functions was artificially restricted to a single one. But today we know communicative language with its orientation towards the object of the utterance and poetic language with its orientation towards the expression itself represent two different, in many

respects opposed, language systems (these two do not, of course, by any means exhaust the multitude of language functions). And because it is constructive things we want-- things corresponding to their purpose-- we are appalled by lampshades that imitate flowers and by false windows you cannot see through. It is for this reason that we haven't got the slightest inclination to express the truths useful for the proletariat in the form of riddles or rhymes. The communication of "useful truths" requires completely different modes of expression: clarity, brevity, precision, unambiguousness, and the like. When a worker is called to a rally, no one suggests that he walk from one suburb of Prague to another in fox trot steps. If a useful truth is to be passed on to the worker, elementary integrity prohibits the use of rhymes, poetic metaphors or any such imaginative gear.

This is not to deny the social role of poetry but merely to protest against making poetry into a contraband smuggled in under the pretext of truths useful for the proletariat. While we cannot require this sort of integrity of Mr. Neumann., who has been brought up on the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde, that celebrator of the lie and of decorative art, we must insist on it with young people.

The bold innovators in Czech poetry, the poets of Devetsil,<sup>6</sup> have set themselves the task of forging the poetic word, a forging uncontaminated by any extraneous factors. In the process they must overcome a sclerotic tradition: leaving it behind and marching their own way, if the tradition is flaccid and wrinkled, or firmly pushing away from it, if it has petrified into a canon.

Russian literature, while furnishing Czech literature with ideological impulses from time to time, has nevertheless remained deeply foreign to it in terms of form and has thus left almost no traces there. Czech literature received the Russian partly as an amazing exoticism and otherwise just went its own way. Recent Russian poetry, however, may conceivably depart from that tradition and provide some fruitful impulses to Czech art.

I am a foreigner and have no wish to meddle in Czech internal affairs, not even in poetic ones. I shall therefore limit myself to a few points which spontaneously come to mind when comparing modern Russian poetry with Czech.

Free verse has been declared virtually canonical in modern Czech poetry, but aside from some valuable, but isolated, instances, it has quickly degenerated into a convenient way of ignoring the tasks of rhythm. As a consequence, free verse in practice remains very largely like that of the nineteenth century after all, only somewhat rickety or spongy. What is lacking here is the rich cultivation of free verse so characteristic of modern Russian poetry. The new rhythmic tasks confronting Czech poets who have renounced syllabic poetry-- for example, a reevaluation of quantitative measures, new rhythmic highlighting of quantity-- are only today reaching

the poets' awareness and finding their place on the agenda of poetic tasks to be worked on.

As long as the old metrical forms continue to be utilized, it is doubtful that the tradition of the nineteenth century has anything left to offer. The rhythmic possibilities of that tradition are utterly exhausted and squeezed out. Their lawful successors are ditties and advertising jingles for the silks made by the Loebel Company. It is not possible to continue on the road of this tradition. The best one can get here is a good imitation like Durych's<sup>7</sup> stylization of Erben. However, the rhythmic richness of the Czech Middle Ages, especially of the fourteenth century, could perhaps still be a fruitful impulse in many respects. I have in mind the problem of Czech verse syllabics, that is, of the removal of obligatory ictuses. Fischer's *Slaves*<sup>8</sup> is a timorous, but at the same time an interesting, attempt in that direction.

Moon--- June, love- Prove, life- strife, flower- power, marx- sparks . . . Are these the rhymes that exhaust the possibilities for the poet today? Even the attempts at rhyming in the fourteenth century were often times much richer.

Allow me to point out a few characteristic types of modern Russian rhyme:

rhymes the ends of which do not coincide (nahota- nahodou, peru- perute, brazda- nazdar, sto- stoh, etc.<sup>9</sup>)

heterosyllabic rhyme (hodla- hodila, visla- visela<sup>10</sup>)

metathetic rhyme (kriosta- skryta, burs- brus srub<sup>11</sup>)

consonance (stal- stul- styl- na postel<sup>12</sup>)

I do not know to what degree these particular kinds of decanonized rhymes will take root in Czech soil but attempt in that direction would, I feel, be beneficial, just as in modern Polish poetry where such attempts have been made partly under Russian influence. Once it is recognized that modern- day Czech poetry not infrequently suppresses the rhythmic importance of word accent, new possibilities will open up for rhymes with different accentual positions (*prolina -slina*), rhymes which until recently Czech critics strictly condemned.

It must be said that the sound organization within the verse is also less worked out; modern Czech poets seem less conscious of it than, for example, Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov or Pasternak. Such clusters as in Seifert's<sup>13</sup> "dlouhe dalekohledy" [long binoculars] (the so- called *povtor*, that is, sound repetition, metatheses of the type abc- ab- cba, according to the terminology of the new Russian poetics is) form a sound- figure parallel, or poetic etymology, as I call it. A broad and varied play on linkages of that sort not only increased the sound density of the verse but also enriches the poetic semantics (by a play on word meanings).

For lack of space, I will not deal with important problems of Czech poetics, semantics, syntax, composition . More about such things on another occasion.

I shall conclude with a few remarks on vocabulary. When Czech language was under threat from a strong, aggressive neighbor, there was some reason for defensive means such as persistent purism and rigid linguistic conservatism,. But that danger has, I believe, been overcome; the Czech language is now so strong that Germanisms are no longer a threat and, provided they help Czech to express fine semantic distinctions, might even be welcome. We know that a language becomes stylistically enriched by foreign elements. Such is the task carried out by Romance elements in English and by Old Bulgarian in Russian. The latter made possible a strictly defined "high style" in Russian. Colloquial Prague Czech, strongly permeated with Germanisms, forms the base for Czech "low style." Hasek masterfully exploits colourful features of colloquial Czech in his *Svejk*. From here it is just one step to street slang which sound so artful in Horejsi's translation of "The Prayer of a Prostitute." 14 But in Hasek's hands, the use of ordinary Czech is justified by the fact that *Svejk* is a good soldier, and in Horejsi by the fact that the heroine is a prostitute. New poetry is polychromatic, classical differentiation of styles is foreign to it. Elastic and dynamic features of common Czech and low-level slang are a treasure for a poet. It would be tempting, without any naturalistic motivation, to try for a simultaneous merging into a pure lyric of the most diverse features of common Czech, of street slang, rural and archaic speech, barbarisms and neologisms. Words become palpable when they scrap together in forced proximity. Russian Futurism resoundingly proclaimed the poets right to a limitless creation of words. Khlebnikov has a number of creations in prose and verse written virtually all in neologisms. A new coinage creates a splotch of color, whereas old words even phonetically lose their aroma, worn out by frequent usage, and their sound texture is only partially perceived. The shape of a word in practical language easily ceases to be recognized-- it fades and petrifies-- whereas we have no choice but to perceive the form of a poetic neologism, given as it is almost in *statu nascendi*. The meaning of neologisms is to a large degree determined by their context, it is more dynamic and forces the reader to think etymologically. An important potential of poetical neologisms is their non-representationality. The law of poetic etymology is in force, the inner and outer form of the word are experienced, but a relation to an object can be missing. Moreover productive experiments in decomposing words into their elements are possible. The word is diversted first of its inner then of its outer form. What remains is a phonetic word *Zaum* 15 (see the poetry or Khlebnikov Kruchenykh, Alyagrov, 16 Zdanevich).

Let us do away with inorganized work in poetry, with this kind of poetical huckstery. The science of poetic form must go hand in hand with poetry. Let us

do away with priestly mysteries, with Delphic oracles. The course of the poet must be conscious while at the same time, his poetic intuition can only profit if it takes hold on the iron- and- concrete foundation provided by scientific analysis. And, conversely, science is fructified by its contact with new art. It is an unnatural state of affairs, brought about in the nineteenth century, for science to pay attention to a literary movement only when it has turned into an archeological fossil. In Russia, the new literature and the young science of literature ( that of the OPOJAZ- group<sup>17</sup>) more often than not advance side by side.

### Transalators' Notes

\* The article originally appeared in the Czech avant- garde review *Pasmo* [The Zone] in May 1925. The original title, "Konec basnickeho umprumactvi a zivnostnictivi," literally The End of Umprum- ism and Small- scale Enterprizing in Poetry," can be rendered in English only with difficulty. It alludes, among other things, to Umprum, the Prague academy of industrial design, which was selected as a representative of a conservative, non -functional approach to design.

1 This is quotation from Viktor Shklovsky's essay "One Thousand Herrings" in his *Knight's move* [Khod knonya], Berlin 1923.

2 *Reflektor*- a communist magazine established in 1925.

3 S. K. Neumann (1857-1947)- a Czech poet and essayist; in his younger days associated with a number of currents, including anarchism, became an ardent supporter of the Communist party in the 1920s.

4 *Rude pravo*- literally "Red Law/right," the daily of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (established 1921).

5 Jaroslav Vrchlicky (1853-1912)- a Czech poet, noted for his formal virtuosity; in many respects akin to French Parnassians.

6 . *Devetsil* - the Key- group of Czech avant- garde writers, artists and architects in the early 1920s; among the members were famous Czech poets such as Jaroslav Seifert (see n. 13) and V. Nezval.

7. Jaroslav Durych (1886-1962) -a Czech poet and writer whose early poetry is influenced by the ballads of the late romantic poet Karel J. Erben (1811-1870).

8. Otokar Fischer (1883-1938) -a Czech writer and literary scholar, later also member of the Prague Linguistic Circle ; Jakobson refers to his play *The Slaves* [Otroci] from 1925.

9. Cf. such possible English rhymes as *paradise- paradox ,history -hysterectomy, heavy- ever, who- hoot.*

10. Cf *country- effrontery, hanging- hankering.*
11. Cf. *system- missed them, scrub- curbs- brusque.*
12. Cf *steel -stole- stale -style.*
13. Jaroslav Seifert (1901-1986)- a Czech poet, member of Devetsil (see n 6), 1984 Nobel Prize laureate. The issue of *Pasmo* in which Jakobson's article appeared also contained two poems by Seifert.
14. Jindrich Horejsi (1886-1941)- a Czech poet; Jakobson refers to Horejsi's translation of the argot- poem "La Charlotte prie Notre- Dame durant la is unit du Reveillon" by the French poet Jehan Rictus (1867-1933).
15. *Zaum'* - the so -called "trans- rational" language; a poetical experiment most often associated with the Russian poet Velimir Khlebnikov (18885-1922) and practised by the Russian futurist poets Jakobson subsequently enumerates.
16. Alyagrov- pseudonym with which Roman Jakobson signed his futurist poetry.
- 17 OPOJAZ- a group of young linguists and literary scholars (including Viktor Shklovsky) that formed in St. Petersburg around 1915; together with the Moscow Linguistic Circle the most important center of Russian formalism.