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JAN FIRBAS

A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR JOSEF VACHEK

In an evening prayer included in the book *Praxis pietatis* by John Amos Comenius, we can read the following words: 'Only a short while ago, this present day was breaking and begun by us as something still belonging to the future. And see, it is gone already! Where has it disappeared, the time of that day which emerged and passed never to return.? ... Grant unto us, dear Lord, that we may know how to count our brief days in this world and deport ourselves wisely'. The last sentence echoes the twelfth verse of the ninetieth psalm, which in the Authorized Version runs, 'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom', and in the Vulgate, 'Dinumerare dies nostros sic doce nos, ut indicamus cor ad sapientiam'. One of not too many who husband their time well was Professor Josef Vachek. As his life and work bore witness, he felt himself responsible for the time he had been entrusted with. He lived, as Thomas Garrigue Masaryk would have put it, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Let me offer a few reminiscences about Professor Josef Vachek. The post-war months of 1945 come to mind. It was then that encouraged, in fact urged on, by the dean of the Brno Philosophical Faculty, Professor Bohuslav Havránek, Dr Vachek handed in his habilitation thesis, a contrastive study which bore the title *Obecný zápor v angličtině a češtině* [Universal negation in English and Czech]. The habilitation session took place at the Brno Philosophical Faculty in the afternoon of the fourth of September. After it had come to an end, Docent Vachek expressed the wish to visit the library of the English Department, called the English Seminar in those days. I was one of its four student librarians, and happened to be the only person present in the Seminar that moment. So it came about that I was the first Brno Anglicist to welcome Docent, later Professor, Vachek to the Brno Department of English. It was on that occasion that Professor Vachek entered my life and started playing a significant role in it. It was not, however, only myself, but the entire Department, with its teachers and students, who benefited greatly from his joining the Brno Philosophical Faculty. After his habilitation, he immediately set to work, devoting his time to teaching, research and the post-war rebuilding of the Department. He went down in history as the founder of its linguistics section. We, the students,

soon realized that we were taught by an excellent teacher and outstanding scholar of international renown.

At the Brno Philosophical Faculty, the atmosphere of the post-war months was unforgettable. The majority of the students were young people who on 17 November 1939 had been prevented from finishing or continuing their university studies or who in consequence of the closure of all Czech schools of university status had been prevented from starting their studies in the course of the war. Especially they appreciated the privilege of being members of a free Alma Mater and were eagerly accepting what it offered them. Professor Vachek's lectures went down particularly well in such an atmosphere of enthusiastic co-operation.

The February events of 1948 cast a shadow on this scene of creative congeniality. I remember the chairman of the Action Committee asking Professor Vachek to appeal to his students fully to identify themselves with what was taking place in our country. Professor Vachek did not betray his principles. In his address to the students, he emphasized that for the benefit of society it is imperative that in one's studies, research or personal life one should observe permanent values verified by history over and over again. This address had not put him into the good books of the Action Committee.

After the February events, Professor František Trávníček became rector of the University. Although his work of the thirties and early forties was undoubtedly influenced by the ideas of the Prague School, he adopted a strongly negative view of Prague functionalism and structuralism. In spite of this, Professor Vachek continued to acquaint his students with the teaching of the Prague School and to draw their attention to problems raised by it and awaiting solutions. He did so in harmony with the results of his research and in good conscience. In this connection, I cannot fail gratefully to recall his pointing out to me the importance of the enquiries into the differences between spoken language and written language and the enquiries into functional sentence perspective. In a discussion organized by the Brno Department of Czech studies some time after the appearance of Stalin's papers on linguistics, Trávníček vehemently criticized Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*. He even went the length of dubbing this classic book of the Prague School 'a pamphlet' and maintained that it was altogether an unscholarly piece of work. In the absence of Professor Vachek, he added that it was intolerable that students of English should be exposed to such false theories as professed by this book. Although Professor Vachek was not mentioned, it was evident that the attack was levelled at him. In real earnest, he pondered whether to leave the Faculty. It was thanks to Professor Havránek that the situation was pacified. Professor Vachek could continue his work. After the untimely death of Professor Adolf Kellner (1953), he was the only teacher at the Philosophical Faculty who extensively acquainted the students with the teaching of the Prague School.

The Brno years of Professor Vachek were truly prolific. In 1959 he founded the series *Brno studies in English*, in which his monographs *Some less familiar aspects of the analytical trend of English* (1961) and *On peripheral phonemes of*

modern English (1964) appeared. In collaboration with Josef Dubský, he compiled the dictionary of Prague School terms, *Dictionnaire de linguistique de l'École de Prague* (1960), which was also translated into Russian (1964). He produced a number of university textbooks very much acclaimed by the students and also used by other Czech and Slovak universities.

Towards the end of the fifties, however, a new shadow was cast over the Brno Department of English and German studies, into which the former English Seminar had been incorporated. With increasing frequency, English studies appeared on the agendas of various Party meetings. In January 1961, the Faculty departments were ordered to arrange special staff meetings at which the staff members were openly to state to what extent they had succeeded in ridding themselves of religious beliefs. To my knowledge, six teachers of the Faculty declared themselves to be practising Christians. Three of them belonged to the Department of English and German Studies: Professor Vachek, his assistant (the author of these lines) and Professor Zatočil. A year later, a very special meeting of this Department had been convened at which to the consternation of those present it was announced that, in compliance with the decision of the Municipal Party Committee, Professor Vachek was to stop teaching in 1964 and his assistant in 1963. The meeting proved to be a moral victory of Professor Vachek. To the consternation, this time of the Party representative, who officiated as announcer of the verdict, Professor Vachek disclosed his decision to accept an invitation extended to him by Professor Havránek, then Director of the Institute of Czech language of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. The invitation offered him a post in this institute, an outstanding centre of linguistic research. In this way Masaryk University lost an eminent teacher and scholar of world-wide reputation.

What did Professor Vachek do with his time after he had ceased to be an internal member of the Brno Department of English and German studies in 1962? Till the end of the academic year 1964–5 he still went on teaching in the Department as its external member. From 1962 to 1971, however, he was attached as a full-time senior research worker to the Institute of Czech Language of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. For one academic year (1968–9) during this period, he acted as ordinary professor ('gewoon hoogleraar') in the venerable University of Leiden. From 1971 to 1974 he taught in Bratislava. He did so in the English section of the Institute of Translation and Interpretation of the University of 17th November, as well as in the English Department of the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University. From 1974 to 1980 he taught in the English Department of the Philosophical Faculty of Šafárik University in Prešov. Throughout all these years he continued to devote his time first and foremost to teaching, research and organization. As organizer he played a leading role in starting off and editing the series of *Travaux linguistiques de Prague* (regrettably discontinued after its fourth volume in the 'normalization' days after 1968); in Bratislava and Prešov he acted as founder or re-founder of the linguistics sections in the departments or institutes where he taught. As for the results of his research, let me mention at least his monographs *Dynamika*

fonologického systému současné spisovné češtiny (1968), *Written language* (1973), followed later in the eighties by *Written language revisited* (1989), and his *Selected writings in English and general linguistics* (1976). As teacher, he produced more university textbooks, including an abridged English version of his *Historický vývoj angličtiny* [The historical development of English], prepared for his students of the University of Leiden.

It should be added that as far as the Czech and Slovak universities are concerned, Professor Vachek also taught in Charles University. He was an external member of its English Department from 1945 to 1971. In the summer of 1964 he was on the faculty of the Linguistic Institute held at Indiana University, Bloomington.

Apart from the spheres just spoken about there were others to which Professor Vachek devoted his time and which deserve special mention. Some of them cannot be severed from his research and teaching activities; all testify that Professor Vachek was a good steward of time entrusted to him.

He was very active in drawing the attention of the linguistic world to the results of the Prague School. Beside the dictionary already referred to, he, for instance, prepared an anthology named *Prague School Reader in Linguistics* (1964) and wrote a book entitled *The Linguistic School of Prague* (1966). In fact, he performed two roles: that of a scholar actively participating in making the history of the Prague School and that of its historiographer.

Throughout all the years I knew Professor Vachek, he always spoke of his teacher, Professor Vilém Mathesius, with grateful respect. On various occasions he also did so in his writings. For instance, his portrait of Mathesius, 'Pětadvacet let od skonu Viléma Mathesia' [Twenty-five years since the death of Vilém Mathesius] (*Časopis pro moderní filologii* 52/1970), should not fall into oblivion and should be read and re-read by Czech and Slovak Anglicists. Professor Vachek rendered both his teacher and the younger generations of linguists a great service by editing collections of Mathesius' papers (*Čeština a obecný jazykozpyt* [Czech language and general linguistics], 1947, and *Jazyk, kultura a slovesnost* [Language, culture and verbal art], 1982) and some of his university lectures on modern English (*Obsahový rozbor současné angličtiny na základě obecně lingvistickém*, 1961, and its English translation by Professor Libuše Dušková, *A functional analysis of present-day English on a general linguistic basis*, 1975).

Few people know that Professor Vachek was a staunch supporter of the football club ČAFC Vinohrady. In his student days he wrote newspaper reports on the matches it played. He even co-edited and contributed to two commemorative volumes, one issued on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the club in 1969 and the other twenty years later in remembrance of its foundation in 1889.

He was eleven years old when he lost his beloved father. It was his mother, Mrs Anna Vachková, who on the way to his remarkable achievements proved to be his guide and stay. She must be remembered here with respect and gratitude. Equal tribute is due to Mrs Pavla Vachková, Professor Vachek's wife, who helped him bear the brunt of the years requiring brave decisions in adverse cir-

cumstances. For Professor Vachek, his family was a haven where he felt safe, secure and happy. He never regretted the time he devoted to his family. Five grandchildren can be proud of their devoted grandfather.

Finally, it must be appreciated that Professor Vachek found the time to write a little volume of memoirs. It bears the title *Vzpomínky českého anglisty* [Reminiscences of a Czech Anglicist] (1994) and is a valuable testimony helping the younger generations to understand the situation in which a Czech linguist lived and worked in the years extending from the early thirties to the end of the eighties. Like Professor Mathesius, Professor Vachek had a fine sense of good and true values worth maintaining.

There are people who live long lives, but with their deeds rather empty than fill them, and so shorten them. There are people who live short lives, but fill them in a worthy way and so lengthen them. Professor Vachek left us at the age of eighty-seven. He lived a life long in years, and rich in achievements not only in the field of linguistics. To the benefit of many he lengthened his life through counting his days in a wise and responsible manner. He will be gratefully remembered by us not only as a model of a university professor, but also as a brave, honest and noble man.

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