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## THE PRAGUE SCHOOL FROM A SEMIOTIC POINT OF VIEW

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*Klíčová slova:* Pražská škola, strukturalismus, sémiotika, teorie literatury, estetika.

### Pražská škola ze semiotického hlediska

*Abstrakt*

V první části studie poukazuje na pět konceptů, které rozhodujícím způsobem formují literárně teoretické a estetické zkoumání Pražské školy, a vysvětluje jejich vznik a vývoj. V druhé části jsou pak tyto termíny charakterizující přínos Pražské školy porovnávány s klasickými kategoriemi a koncepty obecné sémiotiky. V poslední části se studie dotýká těch literárně teoretických a estetických termínů, které sice nejsou přímo souměřitelné se semiotickými kategoriemi, nicméně jsou souměřitelné s obecnou teorií literatury a přispěly k jejímu vývoji.

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The fact that the *Prague Linguistic Circle*, established in 1926, shared some of its members with the Russian Formalist movement, centered around the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* and *Saint Peterburgian OPOJAZ* (Society for the Study of Poetic Language), is well known. Thus, from an external point of view, it can be problematic to strongly divide the two realms of the two schools and demarcate their boundaries. For some scholars this is difficult to the extent that they classify the Prague School as a part of the Russian Formalist movement. Indeed, it is possible to trace the impact of Russian suggestions in several parts of the Prague School investigation – the most striking examples are the Prague School's elaboration of the originally Russian terms of *defamiliarisation* and *motif* and the attention both schools devoted to the study of so called poetic language: Jan Mukařovský in the foreword to his analysis of Karel Hynek Mácha's poem *May* explicitly says that in this particular analysis his use of the term *motif* was inspired by its formalist usage<sup>1</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup> Russian formalists adopted an older term used by A. Veselovskii for the purpose of literary investigation and also changed its meaning substantially: Unlike Veselovskii, who considers motifs reflections of real states of affairs, for the formalists, especially V. Shklovskii and B. Thomashevskii, the notion of motif is connected with specific laws of a *szuzhet* construction of literary artworks.

a specific form of the notion of defamiliarisation called actualisation<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in the Czech structuralist investigation of the process of literary development. Nevertheless, the major and actually essential difference between the two schools lies in their approaches to the identity of literature: unlike the Russian Formalists who sought the identity of literature first in terms of a *poetic language* and second in terms of a specific *creative process* (*sjuzhet*) which, in their view, founds the specific identity of literary artworks, the Prague School structuralists, inspired by the de Saussurian idea of a linguistic sign,<sup>3</sup> proclaimed the literary artwork a specific, complex and structured *sign*.

Let us call the concept of the sign the first concept of the set characterizing the Prague School's theoretical system. The stipulated sign essence of literary artworks leads the Prague School scholars to elaborate upon two important literary semiotic concepts which co-demarcate the core of its theoretical project. First, the sign essence of literary artworks directs their theoretical attention to the *structure*<sup>4</sup> of the sign itself and therefore opens the literary artwork as a whole to a deep analysis of its parts and their relationships; thus structure becomes the second term of our five-member-set. Secondly, thinking of the literary artwork as of a structured sign created for the purpose of a specific communication between its creator and its receiver draws the Prague School scholars' theoretical attention to the concept of the work's *function*; function is number three in our set.

The concept of function develops in the Prague School's literary theoretical inquiry at two levels: at the general level of investigating the system of language and communicative functions introduced by Karl Bühler and Roman Jakobson,<sup>5</sup> which result in the specific system of functional linguistics (Prague School functional linguistics) and at the level of investigating the specific aesthetic function which is reserved for fictional literature and presents one of the most important aspects of Prague School aesthetics.

The fourth crucial term of the Prague School's structuralist approach to literary theoretical investigation can be considered the concept of the *subject*. This con-

<sup>2</sup> As Tomáš G. Winner states, the Czech structuralist notion of actualisation differs from the Russian formalist notion of defamiliarisation in the sense that actualisation encompasses wider contexts of literary artworks than defamiliarisation, which describes merely newly adopted linguistic and poetic tools in order to freshen the reader's perception of literary texts. (see esp. WINNER 2002: 84).

<sup>3</sup> This idea formulated by de Saussure's disciples in the famous *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916 belongs to one of the most influential terms of de Saussure's system in general. It should be added that the Prague scholars were inspired by de Saussure not only in positive ways but also in negative ones: a striking example of this negative inspiration is embodied in Prague critique of the lack of diachronic features in de Saussure's linguistic system.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of structure comes to the Prague school's literary theoretical investigation from the tradition of Czech protostructuralist aesthetics – Josef Durdík in his *Poetics as Aesthetics of a Literary Artwork* (1881) compares literary artworks to a living organism in which every part carries a specific function.

<sup>5</sup> Whereas Karl Bühler considers three basic language functions, Roman Jakobson ultimately developed a system of six language functions.

cept of the subject, adopted from the tradition of European Romantic philosophy and aesthetics, represents within the aesthetic system of the Prague School a category which connects particular aesthetic objects (literary artworks) to individuals participating in the process of literary communication in which these aesthetic objects stand for the object of communication.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, the fifth, both additional as a complementary term helping us to describe the whole system theoretically surrounding the issue of literature and literary communication exhaustively, the notion of *style* can be introduced. Style and stylistics, inevitably intertwined with all the above mentioned categories, refer to an essential feature of the Prague School's approach to investigating its topics and suggesting theoretical solutions. Thus style is the final term of our set.

So far we have introduced five concepts and have observed that they characterize the general shape of the Prague School: *sign*, *structure*, *function*, *subject* and *style*. However, one should bear in mind that these five concepts represent more a set of instrumentally descriptive terms which characterize the main outlines of the Prague structuralist attitude than a consistent and comprehensive system which exhaustively explains all the concepts and strategies employed by Prague scholars.

We can now elaborate on the set of the above chosen terms describing the specific form of the Prague School literary theoretical, aesthetic and linguistics achievements in more detail and describe their integration into a comprehensive literary semiotic system.

*Sign.* As previously observed, Prague structuralism adopts the concept of a linguistic sign from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Nevertheless, in Prague this concept undertook two substantial changes, or better, adjustments. Firstly, it was taken beyond the scope of a linguistic sign and applied to a wider set of literary texts. Secondly, in addition to the term's synchronic qualities, imposed by de Saussure, the Prague scholars included diachronic qualities.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the former adjustment opens ways for investigating literary signs as a specific means of communication, on the one hand, and as specifically structured wholes consisting of specific parts on the other, the latter opens avenues for investigating the development of literary structures through analysing and comparing their particular parts – individual literary artworks.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the notion of the subject can be traced back to the tradition of Czech protostructuralist aesthetics: Otokar Hostinský in his work *Art and Society* from 1907 elaborates on the process of literary communication and stipulates that the final shape of a literary artwork is strongly influenced by subjects entering the specific form of literary communication, that of the originator and on the receiver.

<sup>7</sup> To be precise we have to emphasize that this 'diachronic impulse' can also be recognized in Russian formalist thought: Y. Tynianov and R. Jakobson in their study from 1927 named *Problems in the Study of Language and Literature* articulate the need of using a diachronic approach to language when investigating the process of the *development* of literature.

*Literary artworks are defined as specific signs.* As soon as a literary artwork is proclaimed a specific sign, this sign can be analysed when considered as a whole which can be divided into parts with special relationships between them. At this stage, the second concept characterizing the Prague School's project comes into play: the concept of structure. According to this project, literary artworks represent complex structures and therefore can be analysed as structures – this means they can be analysed as wholes consisting of parts with all the relationships between the wholes and their parts and also between the parts themselves. As already mentioned, taking a lesson from the Russian formalists who tried to define literature firstly on the basis of a poetic language and, secondly, on the grounds of a creative process, Czech structuralists shared an ambition to define the identity of literature by considering literary artworks as structured wholes: a literary artwork is a structured whole whose parts are in dynamic relationships controlled by the aesthetic function which dominates the work. As we can see, the third of the above mentioned features of the Prague School now comes into the picture: the concept of function. The dominant aesthetic function grounded in an artwork and triggered by the reader draws the reader's attention to the literary artwork as a complex structured sign. In other words, the dominant aesthetic function disallows the reader from using a literary artwork as anything other than a sign referring to its own structure. A literary artwork, from the point of view of a literary pragmatics, plays a significant role for the reader: following the Romantic Hegelian difference between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, the Prague School structuralist assigned literary artworks, carrying specific information, an ability to excite the reader to the stage in which they employ a specific relationship to reality. Whereas literary artworks in the system of the Prague School structuralism are evaluated highly in terms of their pragmatic aspects, their semantic aspects seem to be rather underestimated, as will be shown later.

*Literary artworks as signs displaying diachronic features.* In spite of the fact that the ideas developed in the realm of the Russian Formalist School are often oversimplified to the extent that they cut works of literature off from all the connections they have with their milieu, especially with their historical context, the Russian formalists, among other achievements, came up with the concept of the developmental series of literature.<sup>8</sup> This influence, together with the fact that the Prague structuralists never questioned or dismissed literary history and the importance of its results, leads to a very sophisticated system connecting the analysis of particular literary artworks to the analysis of their historical series. For Prague scholars a literary artwork represents a complex structured sign which is

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<sup>8</sup> It is Y. Tynianov who in his essay *Literary Fact* (1924) stipulates the need to investigate developmental literary series of literary artworks in order to ground literary historical investigation. The Prague school's scholars not only adopted the notion of literary developmental series but also connected this idea with a set of tools and strategies, based on linguistics and thematics, which can be used for detailed analysis and description of these series for the purpose of literary historical and historiographical inquiry.

of a dynamic nature: this dynamic nature consists in the work's structural ability to display one of its parts as dominant during the act of reading. This ability lies in the work's competence as a whole to construct specific relationships between its parts. This competence, based in the work's polysemantic nature, can be imagined as a form of semantic energy present in the work and released by a particular act of reading. An interesting circularity can be seen in this part of the Prague School's investigation: The aesthetic function, which is dominant in literary artworks and which by definition turns the readers attention to the artwork itself, to its structure, actually enables the reader to identify the dominant of the work itself – the dominant can vary according to the reader but can also be analysed, at least to an extent. Further, the dominant can be viewed at several levels of the work and function as some kind of joint aggregate of various features and aspects of the work. This assumption actually brings us to the very concept of the whole, which is significant for Prague structuralist thought. The literary artwork as a whole is considered a dynamic structure whose parts are in a permanent tension. The whole as such is, according to Prague structuralists, of a mereological nature – this means that not all the qualities of the whole can be derived from the qualities of its parts.<sup>9</sup> This presupposition results in epistemological consequences: a literary artwork as a whole is, in the Romantic tradition, compared to a living organism whose parts can be analysed in detail but whose main quality, to be alive, is actually beyond any scholarly description. In this particular area of Prague thought we can witness a certain type of scepticism which can be found for example in modern phenomenologically and hermeneutically oriented literary theoretical inquiry.

Literary artworks are dynamic structures which can be viewed and investigated in equally dynamic series. The fact that we can analyse the work's parts, and the Prague School's theoreticians suggest that literary artworks can be investigated at three levels: the linguistic, the semantic and the thematic, enables us not only to analyse and interpret one concrete work but also to compare literary artworks in their essential developmental characteristics with regard to the differences their particular parts display. The idea of so called developmental literary structure is inspired by the idealistic Hegelian system of the development of Absolute Spirit – this particular aspect of the developing literary structure guarantees its partial independence from other developing structures such as the historical and social.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The notion of mereological wholes comes from the ancient philosophical tradition and appears as a leitmotif in many areas of sciences and humanities since. In terms of Czech structuralist thought this presupposition had been claimed repeatedly, especially by Jan Mukařovský and Bohuslav Havránek; whereas the former emphasizes this specificity of literary wholes with regards to the dominating aesthetic function, the latter refers to language structures and mereological wholes in general.

<sup>10</sup> At this point it has to be emphasized that opinions about the relationship between Hegelian philosophy and aesthetics and the Prague school's literary theoretical investigation differ. Generally speaking, the connection between these two systems can be viewed at two levels:

However, the fact that particular embodiments of this structure, concrete literary artworks, can be approached and analysed, primarily by means of stylistics, enables us to trace and compare these material emanations of the idealistic structure. Not surprisingly, this structure is situated in the collective subconsciousness of mankind. The connection between the the idealistic developmental structure of literature and its particular embodiment, the literary artwork, is according to Prague structuralists, provided by subjects.

The notion of the *subject* in the system of Prague structuralism plays two important roles at two different but indivisible levels: at the level of particular literary artworks and at the level of the developing literary structure. At the level of particular works, the use of the term subject grows from the standard model of communication (creating subject and receiving subject) but the importance assigned to subjects in the system of Prague School semiotics of literature widely exceeds the basic communication schema. At some point, literary artworks were proclaimed specific signs serving specific human communication, which is dominated by the aesthetic function. The purpose of this communication is the exchange of a specific type of information which enables perceiving subjects to compare their own reality with the reality displayed by a work of literature and therefore to model the subjects' attitude to their own reality. It is especially Jan Mukařovský, a prominent Prague School literary theoretician and aesthetician, who suggests that the fact that a literary artwork serves mainly as a tool of communication between subjects and the message it carries actually represents their own subjective experience of reality. Mukařovský claims that in order for this subjective message about reality to be meaningful the message itself has to be controlled by a meaning-unifying principle – Mukařovský calls this principle the subject and stipulates that the subject is a point towards which the whole work is centered (see MUKAŘOVSKÝ 2001: 14–15). As we can see subjects in this conception are not only psychophysical human beings present in the process of literary communication but also abstract entities which actually guarantee the semantic unity of a literary work.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, in the Prague School's project we can trace one more way of viewing subjects: subjects mediate between the ideal developing literary struc-

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at the level of self-developing literary structures and at the level of dialectic tension between parts of literary artworks as wholes. Nevertheless, the scholars involved in this aspect of theoretical investigation agree that, in terms of the Prague School, no traces of the Hegelian notion of a teleologically based process of self-consciousness of Spirit can be found in the Prague structuralists' ideas.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the idea that a literary work's meaning can be classified as a subject, however strong this claim may seem, is deeply connected with the very core of the Prague School's structuralist thought: A subject represents the very purpose of a literary artwork that of serving as a means of communication between the originator and the receivers; therefore this subjectivity controls all levels of the artwork and unifies its meaning. This claim supported by Jan Mukařovský proved itself to be strongly influential for some of his followers: Miroslav Červenka in *The Semantic Construction of a Literary Work* (1978) proclaimed an *individual* the ultimate meaning of a literary artwork.

ture and the material world by writing literary books. Thus a literary artwork is determined by the ideal literary structure, on the one hand, and by particular subjects on the other. Whereas the former determines the work's connection to literary production as a whole, the latter determines the work's ability to carry a subjective experience of reality.

As we can now claim, the above suggested set of the Prague School's concepts and categories creates a relatively unified system which allows its scholars to rigorously describe and analyse several aspects of the phenomenon of literature, its identity, development, purpose and functioning. Nevertheless, the system, which can be viewed as a contribution to general literary semiotics, did not seem to be inspired by classical semiotic categories like semantics, syntax and pragmatics. On the one hand, I do not want to insist that for any semiotic system it is necessary to follow this division, on the other hand it is interesting to consider the Prague School's categories in the light of semiotic categories – to be able to see their similarities, differences and relationships.

*Semantics.* The main representative of Prague structuralism, Jan Mukařovský, uses the word (unified) meaning when speaking about the role of a subject who actually guarantees the meaningfulness of a literary artwork. However, in the realm of the Prague School there cannot be found any systematic investigation of this category. We are taught that meaning is based in all levels of a literary artwork and that all the work's parts contribute to the global meaning of the work but here the reasoning stops. Furthermore, as Lubomír Doležel points out, the Prague School scholars left the the issue of fictional reference unsolved: "Without a theory of poetic reference a pivotal problem of literary semantics, the problem of fictionality, could not be tackled. The theoretical system of semiotic poetics was left with a considerable lacuna" (DOLEŽEL 1989: 167). Nevertheless, a different situation emerges when taking into consideration the second term traditionally, at least starting from Frege, connected with meaning – that of intension. Frege teaches us that every linguistic expression consists of two inseparable parts, that of extension = reference (the set of objects a language expression refers to) and intension = sense (the way in which the expression is given). From all that has been said about Prague structuralism it is obvious that the attention which the Prague School's scholars paid to the forms of language expression in their deep stylistic analyses (synchronically and diachronically) corresponds, to a certain extent, with an analysis of the intensional parts of those expressions' meaning.

The category of style can, at a very abstract level, be viewed as related to another semiotic category, that of syntax. Syntactic relationships, as investigated by Prague structuralists, can be divided into two levels: the level of linguistics and the level of thematics. In other words, the syntactic features can be analysed in terms of the microstructure of a literary work, that is, the ways its parts compose the whole, and also in terms of a macrostructure, that is, in the ways in which particular literary works compose a comprehensive thematic structure. With re-



gard to the thematic level of literary artworks Felix Vodička, another prominent member of the Prague School sets his ideas of Jan Mukařovský's preliminary propositions and suggests that the works produce higher thematic units, so called contexts, which are listed by Felix Vodička as *plot*, *character* and *outer (external) world* (see esp. VODIČKA 1948: 113–114). These higher level units, according to Vodička, correspond to our concepts of structured reality<sup>12</sup> and are used by human beings as the means for a very specific form of communication – at this level we enter the realm of literary pragmatics.

The pragmatic level of Prague School literary semiotics seems to be that level of its inquiry which was elaborated upon in most detail. Again, stylistics provides us with general rules of language use, in terms of which devices to use in literary communication in order to achieve a relevant effect, from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. If we understand the term pragmatic as a general focus on the right side of the model of communication, i.e. on the relationship between a work and the reader, at this level we can see one of the strongest points of the Prague School's theory. The detailed elaboration of the function of literature in the conceptualisation and communication of human experience based on the term of the subject represents a rudimentary feature of future reader-based literary semiotic conceptions.

As has been stated, literature in the Prague School view plays an important role in human self-conceptualisation: The reality described in literature makes the readers model their own relationships to reality. In this respect, Vodička's thematic contexts (plot, character and outer world) contribute to modelling the reader's relationship to reality and are crucial in the way they correspond to the human conceptualisation of reality. The fact that these three thematic contexts, basic to both poetics and narratology, are ultimate horizons of the work's meaning and correspond with human experience of reality, actually insinuates the crucial role literature plays in the formation and development of human identity.

Finally, as an appendix, I would like to emphasize three theoretical suggestions developed in the realm of the Prague structuralist approach which are closely related to the analysis performed above and which either coincide with the context of world literary theory or contributed to this context.

Undoubtedly, the first important conception created in this realm is Vodička's previously mentioned system of so called narrative contexts, that is of *plot*, *character* and *outer (external) world*. This conception not only represents the advantage of a proto-narratological system analysing its categories in a firm connection with the procedures of their creation but also puts special emphasis on the

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Vodička, when claiming this, introduces his own alternative view of the relationship between the reality presented and the reality lived. In a fashion comparable to future suggestions of cognitivists he presumes that the similarity between these two realities is based on the ways in which we perceive and conceptualize them. His three categories are bound to reality by strong mimetic ties based on cognitive processes. Another prominent member of the Prague School, Květoslav Chvatík, emphasizes the power of individuals on meaning creation process of literary artworks (see esp. CHVATÍK 1996, pgs. 65–66).

category of outer world and therefore opens the gate to its detailed investigation; this investigation ultimately results in a path which leads to the theory of fictional worlds.

Another crucial concept is introduced by Jan Mukařovský who, when speaking about the meaning of literary works, uses the term *semantic gesture*, which actually enables literary artworks to play a crucial role in the formation of human identity. For Mukařovský, literary artworks serve as a means of communication for the two subjects taking part in the general model of literary communication: the author-subject and the reader-subject. In order to guarantee the work's unified meaningfulness in the process of communication, Mukařovský introduces the term *semantic gesture*. The semantic gesture thus fulfils the role of a general semantic principle deeply involved in the work's overall structure which guards the meaningfulness of a specific and crucial literary communication – it is “a principle of meaning integration“ which is situated between the author, the work's structure, and also the reader (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 2000: 172–73). However, as we can see, Umberto Eco's concept of the *model reader*, developed decades later, displays similar ambitions: “To organize a text, his author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contexts to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume the ensemble of the codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals with them generatively. At the minimal level, every type of text explicitly selects a very general model of the possible reader through the choice (i) of a specific linguistic code, (ii) of a certain literary style, and (iii) of specific specialization-indices“ (ECO 1984: 7).

As much as the term semantic gesture, like the concept of the model reader, contributes to our better understanding of the semantic characteristics of literary artworks, we must admit that this suggestion is of relatively limited analytical value. What is of much greater analytical value is the development of the so called *narrative modes* introduced mainly in the work of Lubomír Doležel. Deeply grounded in the functional linguistics of the Prague Linguistic Circle, narrative modes combine stylistic observation with a modern view of the theory of narrative and its categories. Narrative modes describe important regularities in narrative texts and endow them with the power to cause a particular effect in the reader's conceptualisation of the literary artwork. The system of narrative modes is actually one of the few systems of this stage of literary theoretical investigation which combine linguistic features of literary narratives (narrative speeches) with their semantics (objective vs. subjective narration) and it is alternative to other systems: for example to the ones introduced by Franz Stanzel, Gerard Genette and Dorrit Cohn. Doležel developed the system of narrative modes in the early 1960s and from the 1980s connects them with the crucial notion of *fictional worlds*, which comes into play roughly in the same period. At the level of fictional worlds, he distinguishes between extensional and intensional structures of

the world and in his inquiry into intensional structures, where he introduces the idea of intensional functions, we can witness their strong connection with the achievements of Prague functional linguistics. In this respect the Prague School's heritage continues to play an important role in current developments of theories of narrative in an international context.

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