

Dudová, Markéta

[Procházka, Martin; Pilný, Ondřej, ed. Prague English studies and the transformation of philologies]

Brno studies in English. 2014, vol. 40, iss. 2, pp. [147]-149

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2014-2-9>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/131924>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



REVIEW

Martin Procházka, Ondřej Pilný (eds.): *Prague English Studies and the Transformation of Philologies*, Praha: Karolinum Press, 2012, ISBN: 978-80-246-2156-2, 218 pp.

To commemorate the centenary of Prague English Studies, officially inaugurated in 1912 by the appointment of Vilém Mathesius, who founded the Prague Linguistic Circle, Charles University has published a collection of essays with the two fold aim of accentuating the contributions of Mathesius' revolutionary functional approach to language in philological scholarship as well as of connecting his legacy with recent theoretical approaches such as deconstruction and post-colonial studies. The volume is divided into two sections. The first part reassesses the significance of Mathesius' legacy in literary and translation studies and revisits the work of some of his followers. The second explores the diverse contexts and implications of Structuralism from political aspects of Russian Formalism to recent theories of text and hypertext.

The volume opens with Martin Procházka's chapter "The Value of Language" where he traces different understandings of arbitrariness from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to its modern use in de Saussure's linguistics. Procházka stresses that the radical shift in perspective in the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign, brought about by de Saussure, is inevitably linked with the question of value and truth of language. Procházka evokes Mathesius' essay "On the Potentiality of the Phenomena of Language," important not only for its focus on the notions of value, but also for its potentialities to transform philology into a modern literary and cultural theory. Procházka clarifies how Mathesius' revolutionary functionalism establishes links between linguistics and rhetoric such that by implication the potentiality inherent in language may be viewed from different angles. What Procházka values the most is "the possibility of the change of perspective" (39), that is, the modification of the system and not the firm separation of linguistic and rhetorical viewpoints as evident in de Saussurean semiology. This flexibility, Procházka argues, "is the most important prerequisite for the transformation of traditional philological approaches" (39).

In her essay "Vilém Mathesius as Literary Historian," Helena Znojemská steps into a relatively unmapped territory as she traces in detail the development of Mathesius' views on literary history and criticism. Although Mathesius' popularizing commentaries on aspects of cultural life are well known, his cultural activism has received sporadic academic attention and tended to be seen in isolation from his oeuvre as a whole. To redress this omission and to put Mathesius' texts on literature in a context, Znojemská connects Mathesius' linguistic and literary thinking, claiming Mathesius understood scholarly description of both language and literature as being intimately linked. Znojemská goes back to Mathesius' doctoral dissertation to show that a "scientific analysis" (44) of both language and literature was his goal from the beginning of his career thus to formulate a solid theoretical foundations for the field through a precise and consistent methodology. A methodology of literary criticism did indeed play a crucial role in Mathesius' scholarship because according to

Znojemská his notion of expressive potency was developed as part of Mathesius' scientific approach to literature and was later prominent in his texts on linguistics.

To extend the range of neglect concerning Mathesius' oeuvre, Bohuslav Mánek's essay presents Mathesius as a translator of English medieval poetry. Neglected as his role in translation studies might be, nonetheless, it is not any less revolutionary than that in linguistics. As a critic of the mimetic form of translation, which was required for and practised in most translations in Czech literature since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a method that often deformed the Czech language and spoiled the aesthetic qualities of the original, Mathesius proposed other techniques informed by his linguistic and literary erudition. Aware of differing semantic density in English and Czech verse and attentive to key linguistic aspects and historical contexts of the development of Czech literature, he paved the way for modern Czech translation techniques which were often employed up to the 1950s in the translation of Shakespeare.

In "Structuralism and the Prague Linguistic Circle Revisited," an essay opening the second part of the volume, Robert J.C. Young mitigates the contemporary critique of Structuralism in academia by claiming that "contemporary theory has been in many ways its historical product" (121). Young presents an insightful understanding of Structuralism not as an apolitical and ahistorical movement, but as a deliberate political challenge to imperialist thinking and thus as an intellectual predecessor to post-colonial theory: "Instead of the conventional historical anthropological view of languages, races, cultures and economies, in which some were regarded as more advanced or developed than others, Structuralism placed them all beside each other as equal but different players in the world system" (123). Without even thinking about it, post-colonial theory derives its basic presuppositions and criteria for evaluation from Structuralism, that is, from a movement that "was inherently egalitarian, and cheerfully unconcerned with the aesthetic criteria of value, taste, discrimination that have always been deployed in the West to shore up claims of [its] superiority" (123).

Young further brings Structuralism into close proximity with Marxism, a justified move given the Marxist affiliation with a number of Western European Structuralists. His claim on Bolshevik politics aimed at "self-determination and anti-colonialism" (124) seems overstated and difficult to accept considering the Soviet offensive westward to threaten the independence of Poland as early as 1919 (Davies 1972), or to the Muslim rebellion in Azerbaijan against Soviet power in 1918 which Trubetzkoy experienced first-hand on the side of the White Army and which is today judged to have been "genocide" (Croissant 1998: 14). In his critique of West European imperialist and universalist assumptions, Young seems to turn a blind eye on the 1918 politics of the Soviet Union which – though based on anti-imperialistic ideals – led to similar mass slaughters to those in Indochina or Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s that eventually resulted in many West European intellectuals' embracing Structuralism as an ideological counterbalance to Western imperialism.

The continuities of Structuralism in Eastern Europe are not as straightforward and easy as in Western Europe, especially in Czechoslovakia after "the political triumph" of Marxism, as Young calls the Soviet Revolution and the changes in the dynamics of global politics that followed (124). The two essays that precede Young's, Pavla Veselá's "A Structural History of Zdeněk Vančura" and "Jaroslav Hornát's Critical Method in his Studies of Charles Dickens" by Zdeněk Beran, document how it was not an easy or even feasible task for the Czech Structuralists to persist in Formalist/Structuralist methodology in the changed post-1948 climate. Many works that the critics produced after the political changes are dominated by Marxist attitudes and Marxist literary criticism focusing on content, social background, politico-economic conditions and pedagogical value rather than on form and devices. Their later works thus appear as negations of rather than continuities with their pre-war studies. Similarly, Ondřej Pilný's essay "Jan Grossman, Prague Structuralism, and the Grotesque," shows that it was only in the 1960s, during the moderate thaw in censorship, when Grossman, who as a former student of Václav Černý and Jan Mukařovský had been persistently harassed by the Czechoslovak communist authorities, was able to employ Structuralist methodology in his theatrical practice. Pilný's examination of Grossman's commentary reveals that Grossman's well-known production of Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu* (1964) is based on meticulous Structuralist theoretical apparatus, albeit modified and loosened by Grossman's inspirational collaboration with Václav Havel to enhance the relevance of the play's theme to life in

a totalitarian regime and at the same time to maintain a significant ambiguity to prevent the recipient from an uncritical acceptance of that what is produced and promotes the theatre as a space of a free conversation between the recipient and the work of art.

Erik S. Roraback's chapter "A Gateway to a Baroque Rhetoric of Jacques Lacan and Niklas Luhmann" assesses some distinguishing features of the ideological content and rhetorical nature of selected works by Lacan and the German systems theorist Luhmann. As he argues that the Luhmannian approaches to sense and context were anticipated in the thought of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Roraback interprets the high rhetorical standards of Lacan and Luhmann's texts with the help of functional approach developed by Mathesius together with concepts formulated by the philosopher Ladislav Rieger. Also vital to Luhmann's systems theory are the terminology and ideas of Edmund Husserl, who lectured to the members of the Prague Philosophical Circle in 1935. This terminology and these ideas are therefore used to point out the understated role of Prague School in the epistemic formulation of two major twentieth-century thinkers.

The final chapter is "Attesting / Before the Fact." Here Louis Armand faces a failure of rigorous methodology in philology, a question renewed by Geert Lernout, one of the representatives of textual genetics. Lernout coined the term "radical philology" to deal with the conceptions of semio-linguistic anteriority and scientific verifiability. Lernout concedes that any philology must take into account its lack of completion. As a result, philology can never be more than an "approximative method" (200) bound up with semio-linguistic or signifying materiality. The very interesting question – "how, then, we can assume an initial state of signification – the point at which the perception [...] cedes to the act of 'reading'" is further dealt with in this essay with the help of Lacan's psychoanalysis and Derrida's deconstruction. Armand stresses that radical philology problematizes the value of language and poses the problem of the impossibility of distinguishing symbols and facts. And it must be added that, though not addressed, these issues were at least anticipated by Prague Structuralists.

The volume does not have the ambition to cover or define all relevant aspects of the transformation of philology within the development of Prague English Studies and in the broader framework of Prague Structuralism. The individual approaches of both Czech and foreign scholars are diverse and address various topics. In this respect, it would be interesting to see how the topic is handled by the forthcoming publication *Český strukturalismus v diskuzi (Czech Structuralism in Discussion)*, a collection of translated essays by foreign literary critics and historians writing on the poetics, semiotics and aesthetics of Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson edited by Ondřej Sládek.

The volume edited by Procházka and Pilný avoids the stereotypical evaluation of Structuralism as an apolitical and ahistorical movement. Instead one of the major achievements of the volume is to show Structuralism to be anchored in contemporary cultural discussions, with ambitions to use art, literature or academic theories to influence the politics of a totalitarian state. By showing common denominators and parallels between Mathesius and Bakhtin, between Mukařovský and later Structuralists or the Prague Linguistic Circle and Lacan or Luhmann, the publication in addition succeeded in establishing a strong connection between the Prague theorists and the twentieth-century's most influential thinkers. The fresh perspective of this volume thus invests Prague Structuralism with the urgency, vivacity, relevance and topicality that the movement undeniably deserves.

References

- Croissant, Michael P. (1998) *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Causes and Implications*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing.
- Davies, Norman (1972) *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War 1919-1920 and 'the Miracle on the Vistula'*. New York: Pimlico and Random House.
- Sládek, Ondřej (ed.) (2014) *Český strukturalismus v diskuzi*. Brno: Host.

Markéta Dudová

Address: Markéta Dudová, Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic. [email: dudova.marketa@gmail.com]