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Prague English Studies
and the Transformation
of Philologies

Prague English Studies and the Transformation of Philologies

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Published on the occasion of the centenary of Prague English Studies.

This book is dedicated to Zdeněk Stříbrný, on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

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INTRODUCTION

Martin Procházka

This book commemorates the centenary of Prague English Studies, officially inaugurated in 1912 by the appointment of Vilém Mathesius (1882-1945), the founder of Prague Linguistic Circle (1926) and the first Professor of English Language and Literature at Charles University. The volume is divided into two sections: the first part reassesses the significance of Mathesius's legacy in literary and translation studies and revisits the work of some of his followers, especially Zdeněk Vančura (1903-1974) and Jaroslav Hornát (1926-1990); while the second explores the diverse contexts and implications of Structuralism (as the major influence on Prague English Studies) from political aspects of Russian Formalist theories and the poetics of the Czech avant-garde, via the aesthetic of the grotesque and the rhetorical features of the works of late Structuralists (Jacques Lacan and Niklas Luhmann), to recent theories of text and hypertext.

Theoretically, the individual approaches are fairly diverse: from interpretations of Mathesius's functionalism in epistemological, semiological or aesthetic contexts, to Post-structuralist views of the relationship between symbols and facts (or fictions) in philology. Discussing the methodological problems related to the transformations of philology, our approach distinguishes several stages in the process: the formation of humanistic philology in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries influenced by Classical rhetoric (especially by Aristotle and Quintilian), the emergence of modern philology from a wider Romantic project of cultural studies and, finally, the repudiation of the "historical method" of modern philology by Structuralist linguistics. This last event

is reinterpreted in the wider context of the evolution of philology and with respect to different approaches to (and strategies of) inter-disciplinarity in humanistic and modern philologies and in Structuralism.

Following Paul de Man,[1] the major concern of the methodological agenda of this book can be identified as *the problem of rhetoric*, which is further expanded in the opening chapter to the second part and contextualized with respect to the crucial issues of nineteenth-century philology as modulated by Prague Structuralism. The main aspects of this problem are rhetoric's liminal position between grammar and logic, structure and meaning, and its concerns with truth, performativity and the value of language. Reassessment of these issues appears vital to an understanding of the dynamics of recent transformations of Structuralist methodologies (exemplified by the works of Lacan and Luhman) and of philology (in textual genetics) which are discussed in the concluding section. The other, closely related problem, is that of the methodology of cultural theory and literary history. Although the representatives of Prague English studies succeeded in overcoming the rigidity of the Saussurean synchronic approach, their treatment of dynamic structures is still considerably indebted to traditional notions of value and nineteenth-century views of literature as the representation of national identity and unity. While Mathesius demonstrates that value is founded on the internal dynamism of structure, especially on the "potentiality of language phenomena" (explained as an "oscillation" generating functional relationships and leading to constant changes of theoretical perspectives), his historical approach is characterized by the hypothesis of the "community of language users," whose totalizing and teleological moments point back to Romantic organicism and nineteenth-century biologism and virtually preclude wider application of the functional method. Despite this, individual studies, such as the research of Renaissance Euphuism

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1   See his *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979); *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1984); *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) and especially "Resistance to Theory," *Yale French Studies* 18 (1979): 1-23. A relevant commentary on de Man's project, particularly on its Nietzschean background, is Carlo Ginzburg's *History, Rhetoric and Proof* (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 1999).

undertaken in the 1930s and 40s by Zdeněk Vančura, have demonstrated the possibilities of Mathesius's functionalism, especially in histories of genres and other literary forms. The initial chapter of the second part of this book then demonstrates the ways in which the limits of functionalism were transcended by Nikolay Troubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson.

The first part of this volume entitled "Legacies: Vilém Mathesius and Followers" opens with Martin Procházka's analysis of Mathesius's functional approach in several historical and theoretical contexts of Classical rhetoric, Saussurean semiology and Romantic philology. The chapter entitled "The Value of Language: Rhetoric, Semiology, Philology and the Functional Approach" discusses first the epistemological, political and ethical implications of "arbitrariness" in Aristotelian rhetoric and Saussurean semiology and shows the importance of the former approach for the critical orientation of humanistic philology represented by the fifteenth-century Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla. Mathesius's "synchronistic" and functional approach is here contrasted with the project of Romantic philology (represented by Friedrich Schlegel), which generated, among others, the historical study of language, typical of the German school of "Neogrammarians" (*Junggrammatiker*), whose methods were repudiated by Mathesius and other Structuralists.

    The concluding part of the chapter shows that Mathesius's approach is based on a different notion of development than the linear growth typical of the schemes of the "Neogrammarians." His system develops by virtue of its internal dynamism described by Mathesius as the "oscillation of speech among individuals inside the communities of language." This oscillation, which is later used in the context of Michel Foucault's theory of discourse as a paradigm by New Historicism, generates a plethora of potentialities whose materializations can either contribute to the system's "dynamic stability" ("norm") or, more importantly, can provide the means for the expression of individual active attitudes to reality. From this perspective, the expressive function of language, or "language instinct," fully realized in leading literary

works, appears more significant than the communicative function dominating the social uses of language.

As a consequence, Mathesius's approach (influenced, among others, by Croce's expressive aesthetics) is, on the one hand, desirable, as a possibility of transcending a narrowly functionalist view of language. On the other hand, it involves some risk, since it may lead to the transgression of generally valid language norms and "styles" (Mathesius and other Prague Structuralists use the term "functional styles of language" to include its communicative and expressive functions). Mathesius attempts to control this tension between invention and stability by means of two strategies. Firstly, he avoids the question of "literariness" discussed by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) and other Russian Formalists, and focuses instead on the linguistic interpretation of literary language thereby subordinating rhetorical to linguistic phenomena. Despite its primarily regulative function, this approach is also productive, providing a different perspective on rhetorical figures as being the results of the interaction of phenomena at different language levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic, thematic) and their different expressive functions. The second strategy that regulates Mathesius's approach is the application of the hypothesis of the "language community" which also dominates the theories of many other representatives of Structuralism. Based on the obsolete Romantic notion of the "organic community" and infused by contemporary biological views of the nation ("national biology"), this concept not only represents a totalizing, ideological aspect of Mathesius's method (introducing modern functionalism into nineteenth-century ideological notions of language and literature as principal signs of the excellence and exceptional character of a specific nation), but also imposes a restriction on the development of literary theoretical aspects in his later work. In Mathesius's opinion, the major purpose of literature is to contribute to the growth of the nation's organic structure. As a result, one of the major potentialities of Mathesius's revolutionary functionalism, namely the transformation of philology into modern literary and cultural theory, has remained undeveloped. This is evident when comparing Mathesius's project with other twentieth-century attempts to transform philology – especially Mikhail Bakhtin's historical poetics.

The following chapter by Helena Znojemská discusses "Vilém Mathesius as Literary Historian." Although Mathesius progressively focused on linguistic problems in his scholarly output, he also produced the monumental, though truncated, *History of English Literature*, and continued to comment on issues of literary criticism in texts of a more popular nature such as "The Origins and Nature of Critical Judgement" and "On the Functions and Tools of Literary Criticism." Despite the fact that the *History of English Literature* has been hailed as a foundational act of Prague English Studies, no systematic attempt has been made at a detailed analysis of the evolution of his thought on aesthetics and literary criticism, nor on their potential affinities with the theories of other members of the Prague Linguistic Circle (René Wellek, 1909-1997; Jan Mukařovský, 1891-1975). Znojemská's chapter remedies this lack and confronts Mathesius's specific methodology and findings with the propositions voiced in the more theoretical statements on the nature of literary criticism, and in his linguistic works. It also searches for possible continuities between Mathesius's propositions on the nature of a literary work of art and the much more refined theoretical positions developed by Wellek and Mukařovský (e.g., the structural unity of the work of art as a basis of its evaluation, or the concept of art as semiotic fact). Particularly important in this second line of enquiry is the concept of "norm" and its links to Mathesius's notions of "dynamic stability" and, as a function of its wider applicability, "dynamic classicism."

In the next chapter on "Vilém Mathesius as Translator and Theoretician of Translation," Bohuslav Mánek discusses Mathesius's principal translations, that of H.G. Wells's collection of essays *An Englishman Looks at the World* and a selection from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales.* Mánek also analyses the translations of the extracts from diverse authors interspersed throughout his *History of English Literature,* which was written in Czech; subsequently, he defines Mathesius's position in the development of Czech translation theory and practice and discusses his theoretical approach to translation and its individual techniques (derived from his functional approach). Special attention is given to Mathesius's analysis and criticism of Czech translation practice and of its specific problems, such as the translation of blank verse.

Mathesius's legacy in terms of the work of his pupils and followers among Czech scholars in English and American literature is the topic of the two following chapters, both of which also discuss the impact of the political upheaval resulting from the instalment of the communist totalitarian regime, whose ideology was, by and large, hostile to Structuralism. In the first chapter, entitled "A Structuralist History of Zdeněk Vančura," Pavla Veselá traces "the ruptures and continuities" in the work of this leading Czech Americanist of the mid-twentieth century. Her analysis of Vančura's work starts from with his early studies of Renaissance and Baroque prose and periodization in early modern English and American literature. These writings are discussed in the context of Russian Formalism, Prague Structuralism and Mathesius's functional approach. Vančura's conclusions about literary history, typical of his early work, are confronted with the major tendencies in his later writings which are influenced by the political changes in Czechoslovakia after the victory of communism in 1948.The chapter explains Vančura's efforts to repudiate Structuralism under ideological pressure from the totalitarian regime, but it also demonstrates that it was not unreservedly negative as these historical changes also stimulated Vančura to develop and expand upon his previous positions and to establish a certain, though not unproblematic, continuity of his later approaches with the functional method.

The chapter on "Jaroslav Hornát's Critical Method in His Studies of Charles Dickens" by Zdeněk Beran concludes the first part of the book. As a detailed case study it deals with Hornát's interpretation of Dickens's oeuvre in a series of essays, which accompanied the project of its modern Czech translation for the *Knihovna klasiků* (The Classics Library). As a result, the chapter documents the interrelationship of literary studies with translation practice, an important aspect of the modern transformation of philology and focuses on the Structuralist influences on Hornát's approach to Dickens, especially Jan Mukařovský's theory of "norm" (closely related to Mathesius's functionalism), Felix Vodička's (1909-1974) concept of "concretization," and their notions of narrative structure, chiefly the relationship of "*fabula*" and "*sujet*" discussed first by the Russian Formalists. Although Hornát's method can be said to follow and expand upon Vančura's Structuralist analysis of

Euphuism and its rhetoric (this is evident from Hornát's study *Anglická renesanční próza* – English Renaissance Prose, 1970), in his essays on Dickens's novels Hornát evidently develops the Structuralist approach, deepening it especially in terms of a functional analysis of motifs and the emotional expressivity of Dickens's style.

The second part of the book, "Contexts and Outcomes: From Prague Structuralism to Radical Philology," opens with an extensive chapter "Structuralism and the Prague School Revisited" by Robert J.C. Young. Using the expertise of his highly influential work on Post-colonialism and critical theory, Young demonstrates that Structuralism did not emerge as a mere "literary methodology relating to grammar, phonology and stylistics (as in the work of Vilém Mathesius and Jan Mukařovský)," but also, and perhaps more importantly, "as a broader cultural project in a self-conscious anti-Western strategy, directed against the hierarchical imperialist cultural and racialist assumptions of European thought." As a consequence suggests Young, the Structuralist projects of Nikolai Troubetzkoy (1890-1938) and Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) "can be affiliated [...] to the huge body of anti-colonial thought that was developed round the world during the first half of the twentieth century and which now forms the basis of Postcolonial Studies." Young's stimulating interpretation of the synchronic approach as "anti-ethnocentric general theory to put all cultures, high/low, west/east/south, on a level playing field" indicates that it possesses an undeveloped potentiality. It can be argued (as Jacques Derrida did as early as 1966, pointing out the "rupture" in Lévi-Strauss's ethnological project[2]) that the failure of Structuralism to fulfil its promise of becoming a general methodology of the "human sciences" led to a steep decline of its influence – even to the extent that few today seem to take it seriously.

If Structuralism is so easy to dismiss now, asks Young, why were so many of the most pre-eminent intellectuals of the era, such as Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Althusser, and Barthes so taken with it? To answer

[2]   Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 273-92.

this requires the kind of assiduous reconsideration of the origins of Structuralism in the work of Jakobson and Troubetzkoy that Young's chapter contains. Although no more than "outsiders to the Prague Circle," these Russian scholars were responsible for formulating the method and indeed the very name – Structuralism. Arguing that "the conceptual basis of Structuralism was created […] in part as a form of émigré culture, underpinned by a form of Russian nationalism," Young points out the interdisciplinary basis of their project, which effected the transformation of the approaches of nineteenth-century philology: "Troubetzkoy like many linguists of his time was also an ethnologist and anthropologist, folklorist and dialectologist." Nonetheless, Troubetzkoy's 'philological' orientation was clearly based on a critique of the ethnocentric culture of Europe and constituted "the espousal of a new kind of Russian nationalism, centring its identity in Eurasia," the subsequent idealization of early medieval Slavic history, the so-called "Great Moravia," or even, as T.G. Masaryk conceived it, the notion of Czechoslovakia as a "bridge" between the East and the West. Unsurprisingly, these notions evolved from the Romantic idea of "organic unity" used to cover up subversive aspects of "hybridity," which then came to dominate the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Unlike Bakhtin's approach, Troubetzkoy's project is characterized by a repudiation of Eurocentrism: a "radical critique of European culture from the point of view of the world outside Europe," which also involves an attack on current Western notions of "progress," as "the forced acquisition, through imperialism, of European modernity by other cultures around the world."

Although Troubetzkoy might have been inspired by the ideology of Pan-Slavism, he transcends its Romantic framework in inclining towards a Structuralist (and even Post-structuralist) perspective, where hierarchical differences among cultures are discarded in favour of the "synchronic" approach: "There is neither higher nor lower. There is only [the] similar and dissimilar." According to Young, this theoretical stance anticipates Lyotard's views that the "value of different cultures […] marked by […] the *différend*, their 'qualitative incommensurability' or their untranslatability," reflected also in Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" and Edward Said's critique of colonialism. From

this angle, Troubetzkoy's project appears as a "complete restructuring of the ethnocentric cultural hierarchy that operated at the foundation of western imperial civilization in the disciplinary formation of its knowledges." Roman Jakobson's reflections, which stimulated both Lacan's analysis of the unconscious and Lévi-Strauss's approach to the "savage mind," had developed from the same source.

Analyzing the Structuralist approach to language development, Young shows that "[t]he Prague School doctrines were both […] technical and ideological: the emphasis on synchrony was deliberately opposed to the historicist Indo-European comparative linguistics of the nineteenth century that had been dominated by German historical scholarship, and which had been committed to implicitly racialist notions of linguistic hierarchy that assumed the superiority of European languages." Against the tree model (*Stammbaumtheorie*) of the "Neogrammarians," Troubetzkoy came up with the theory of the *Sprachbund*, or the convergence of languages on "non-genetic basis" designed to explain "the linguistic cohesion of Eurasia." Significantly, this theory shifted "the language model from a linear to a spatial evolution, from the language tree to the linguistic chain, net or, to move to Deleuzian terms, the rhizome." The importance of the *Sprachbund* results from the facts that it "denies simple nationalist identifications with languages on the European model" and makes "an important distinction between language and culture: cultural zones, such as Eurasia, are formations of the same kind as language zones, but they are not necessarily to be identified with them." In other words, although the zones of language and culture are separate, Troubetzkoy's "diffusionist" approach also emphasizes the "formative role of language on culture so that genetically unrelated languages begin to cohere within a single geographic and cultural historical zone." Young clearly demonstrates the features of Troubetzkoy's model that anticipate Post-structuralist notions of an open, dynamic totality of the sort explored by Derrida and Deleuze. His analysis is expanded by a stimulating comparison of different approaches to hybridity and assimilation in linguistic, ethnic and cultural terms, confronting the works of the eccentric Soviet linguist Nikolai Yakovlevitch Marr (1865-1934), Troubetzkoy and Jakobson.

All this clearly shows an important dimension, added by Troubetzkoy and Jakobson to the project of the Prague School and to Structuralism in general. Thanks to their ambitious revision of many of the principal tenets of nineteenth-century philology, Structuralism became "a cultural and political project whose epistemological reach formed a wide-ranging challenge to the Eurocentric presuppositions of European positivism and the forms of knowledge that had been developed under its aegis."

The following chapter on "Functional Linguistics as the 'Science of Poetic Forms'" by David Vichnar discusses the major features of the poetics of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Vichnar shows how the poetic theory of Prague Structuralism grew out of direct engagement with poetic practice, which in turn was informed by contemporary advances in the field of poetics. This is exemplified by the friendships and close collaborative relationships of Jakobson with a number of Russian and Czech poets, but especially with Vítězslav Nezval. The heritage of Vilém Mathesius is then revisited as a source of inspiration for two of his followers in the fields of poetics and aesthetics: Bohuslav Havránek (1893-1987) and Jan Mukařovský. On the basis of their engagement in a vital public discussion concerning the matter of prescriptive poetics and literary criticism, Vichnar argues that although the part played by Mathesius and his followers in the debates of the 20s and 30s on Czech "Poetism" (*poetismus*) and Surrealism may have been overshadowed by their more illustrious Russian co-member, their importance for, and alliance with, the Czech avant-garde is not to be underestimated.

Specific points in the impact of Structuralism, mentioned at the outset of Robert Young's analysis, are the focus of Erik Roraback's chapter, "A Gateway to a Baroque Rhetoric of Jacques Lacan and Niklas Luhmann." Interpreting major features of the ideological content and rhetoric of selected works by this French psychoanalytic thinker and the German systems theorist, Roraback compares them to the phenomenological Structuralism of the Czech-born Husserlian philosopher, Ladislav Rieger (1890-1958) and of the theories of the Prague Linguistic Circle. In this context, Rieger's ground-breaking essay, "The Semantic Analysis of Philosophical Texts" (which addresses the problem of representation), is used to highlight contentious areas in Luhmann's systems-theory, which otherwise builds upon Husserl in many key respects. The chapter uses

aspects of Mathesius's functional approach (developed in the "Theses" of the Prague Linguistic Circle presented at the Prague Congress of Slavists, 1929) to reveal the connections of Prague semantic analysis with the problems of rhetoric in both Lacan and in Luhmann.

The chapter on "Jan Grossman, Structuralism, and the Grotesque" by Ondřej Pilný examines the use of the Structuralist method by Jan Grossman (1925-1993), a pupil of Jan Mukařovský and Václav Černý, and arguably one of the most influential figures of twentieth-century Czech theatre. It focuses on Grossman's essays on Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* plays, Kafka's *The Trial*, and the plays of Václav Havel and uses these texts as the basis of an exegesis of Grossman's staging of Jarry, emphasizing the use of the grotesque in the context of totalitarian Czechoslovakia. Grossman's theoretical and practical development of Structuralist methodology within the context of a restrictive political regime is linked with stimuli from Mathesius's functional approach and contrasted with Mukařovský's 1940s essays on the theatre in which the latter's Structuralism begins to slide towards a totalizing ideology and ultimately advocates agit-prop. Grossman's version of absurdist drama, developed in close collaboration with Václav Havel, is seen to promote the theatre as a space in which the recipient is not to regulate what is produced but is rather to engage in a free conversation with a work of art that ultimately unmasks recondite evil. The use of the grotesque represents a principal ingredient in this version of absurdism; its form stands as an inheritor of the concept of the medieval grotesque outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin, who identified in it a "power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation."

The final chapter of the volume, "Attesting / Before the Fact" by Louis Armand, opens with a discussion of "radical philology," a term coined by Geert Lernout, one of the representatives of "textual genetics," in his analysis of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* notebooks. Any philology, from historical approaches to language to the study of language acquisition, must take into account its "incompletion" (resulting from the incompatibility of intuitive approaches to what exists before signification and the semiotic study of communication). As a result, philology can be only an "approximative method" (or a system of knowledge) bound up with the materiality of signifying. This poses important problems concerning the

relation of signs or "symbols" to facts: the impossibility of distinguishing between them. Since a decisive part of philology has consisted in "enumerating sets of facts that correspond with language" in symbolic, rhetorical or poetic terms, the problem of the verifiability of this correspondence arises. This problem entails symbolization and becomes "a theoretical fiction" which refers to the question of responsibility and the relation to the Lacanian Real or the Other. In this way, "radical philology" problematizes the value of language, relating it to the questions of fiction and of the unspeakable. Although these issues were not directly addressed by Prague Structuralists, they were arguably anticipated by them, especially in Mukařovský's analysis of "unintentionality."[3]

The present volume does not pretend to list, explain and define all relevant aspects of the transformation of philology within the development of Prague English Studies and in the broader framework of Prague Structuralism. Inspired by Mathesius's functional approach and also provoked by the powerful theoretical and methodological stimuli presented by Troubetzkoy and Jakobson, this volume attempts to cast light on selected genetic and contextual aspects of the Structuralist transformation of philology. These features are typical both of its local dimensions within the framework of Prague English Studies and of its broader contextual relationships with dominant trends in nineteenth-century philology and twentieth-century linguistics, anthropology and cultural theory. In several ways it also demonstrates the interdependence of the theoretical and practical moments of this process, tracing its links to the rhetoric of theoretical writing, translation projects, avant-garde poetry and stage practice.

We are pleased to acknowledge an important aspect of the genesis of this volume by way of a final remark: apart from commemorating the centenary of Prague English Studies, this book is intended as a tribute to the doyen of Prague Anglicists, Professor Zdeněk Stříbrný, whose ninetieth birthday coincided with the centenary of English Studies.

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[3]   Jan Mukařovský, "Intentionality and Unintentionality," *Structure, Sign and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978) 89-128.