To Enter the Circle

The Functionalist Structuralism of the Prague School

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What is decisive is not to get
out of the circle but to come
into it the right way.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

Two movements crucial in the shaping of present-day scholarship arose in nearby European cities under similar titles: the Vienna Circle and the Prague Linguistic Circle. Language was the central concern of both, but their approaches to it diverged considerably. The Viennese philosophers, inspired by the natural sciences, emphasized the logical aspect of language and concentrated on syntax. Their aim was to construct a scientific language whose precision would eliminate the previous errors of philosophy, which they attributed to the ambiguities of natural language. The Prague linguists' object of study, in contrast, was cultural phenomena, and so they stressed the pragmatic and semantic aspects of language in all of its functional heterogeneity. Language—the most versatile means of human communication—was studied under the rubric of semiotics, the general matrix of all cultural phenomena shared and exchanged by the members of a society. The monofunctional approach of the Vienna Circle dominated theoretical thinking in the first decades after World War II, but recent developments in all branches of scholarship are changing the situation. As the Swiss phenomenologist Elmar Holenstein has stated, “without any doubt, the wind is now blowing in the direction of Prague.”¹

Despite the signal value of the Prague Linguistic Circle for modern scholarship, its reception in the English-speaking world has been rather curious. In the fifties and early sixties its image was controlled by two misconceptions: Prague structuralism was identified almost exclusively with linguistics, and, even more narrowly, with Jakobson's and Trubeckoj's phonology.² Only in the mid-sixties, when structuralism was gradually gaining respectability in the hu-

manities and social sciences, did scholars discover that the study of the arts and folklore was an integral component of the Prague School. But its achievements in these fields were perceived as dated, and for many, the Circle was "a mere bridge between two superior theoretical positions, 'pure' Formalism and 'modern' Structuralism."³ Prague structuralism seemed to hold little more than a transitional place in scholarly thinking.

Preminger's *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* illustrates this attitude especially well. It contains no entry for the Prague School. Its essay on structuralism, written by Jonathan Culler, depicts the movement solely as a brainchild of French literary theoreticians of the sixties: thus, structuralism "has been assimilated and developed in various ways by practitioners in other countries but it remains in its most distinctive and characterizable form a French movement."⁴ Not French and too early, the Prague School finds its way into the *Encyclopedia* only in Victor Erlich's essay, "Russian Formalism," there depicted as a group of theoreticians who "restated the basic tenets of Russian formalism in more judicious and rigorous terms."⁵

Culler's and Erlich's remarks require some comment. Though it is obvious that Prague structuralism is linked to Russian formalism, Erlich's statement is clearly one-sided. Structuralism is not a mere restatement of formalism, however judicious or rigorous. It is much more: a new paradigm of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences which—as the Circle's members were quick to point out—replaced the previous positivist paradigm. (This transition is discussed in the final chapter of this book.)

If Erlich's pronouncement betrays a particular bias, Culler's merely reveals a certain ignorance. Witness the rather comic parallel between his pronouncement and a passage from another encyclopedic entry on structuralism: "At its present stage," wrote Jan Mukařovský in 1940, "the development of structural esthetics is a phenomenon of Czech scholarship which has partial analogues in other nations as well but which nowhere else has achieved an equally systematic consideration of its methodological basis."⁶

The similarities between these two entries do not end with this passage. Mukařovský and Culler characterize the structuralist stance in art theory as a holistic and semiotic attitude toward artistic facts, an emphasis on the cultural codes underlying individual works, and a merging of linguistics and literary studies. These striking parallels suggest that structuralism is not a phenomenon limited to one country or one decade but, as Jakobson presciently urged in 1929, "the leading idea of present day science in its most various manifesta-

tions."⁷ Structuralism is a scholarly paradigm that has been with us for more than fifty years and still has not lost its appeal. The length of its history and its distribution across various disciplines and countries have produced divergent trends and groupings—Copenhagen "glossematics," Derridian "poststructuralism," and so on. But this diversity occurs within a single paradigm and should in no way obscure what all schools and movements have in common.

From this perspective, the Prague School is a particular historico-geographical crystallization of structuralism that is as distinctive as its French successor. This "epistemological stance" is discussed in the last chapter of this book, but I shall mention here the specific trait that sets the Prague Circle apart from other structuralist trends. A superficial glance at the Prague School titles is enough to suggest it: Mathesius' "Functional Linguistics," Bogatyřev's "Functional-Structural Method and Other Methods of Ethnography and Folkloristics," Mukařovský's *Esthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts*.⁸ All these reveal the teleological conception of structure as the point of departure for this school. "To see structure as functional rather than material," as one of Mukařovský's reviewers recently observed, "is a key theme of the Prague School, and its failure to penetrate more recent structuralist thought is an immense intellectual loss."⁹ "Functionalist structuralism" would thus seem the most appropriate characterization of the endeavors of the Prague School.

The central aim of this volume is to present the diversity of interests within the Prague School: literary criticism, linguistics, theory of theater, folkloristics, and philosophy. Some essays have a special historical value in illuminating crucial stages of structuralist thinking. Others reveal the timeliness of the Prague School's contributions for the theoretical conflicts of our day. The introductory notes and the chronological ordering of the essays are intended to give the reader a sense of the evolution, richness, and breadth of Prague structuralist thought.

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NOTES

1. "50 Jahre Cercle linguistique de Prague: Stichworte zu einem Vergleich von Prager und Wiener Kreis," *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, December 23, 1976.

2. See, for example, the entry "Prague School" in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 30 vol. (Chicago, 1974), vol. 8, p. 175.

3. L. M. O'Toole, "Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19, (1979), 378.

4. "Structuralism," in A. Preminger (ed.), *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Enlarged Edition* (Princeton, 1974), p. 983.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 727.

6. "Strukturální estetika" [Structural esthetics], *Ottův slovník naučný nové doby*, 6 vols. in 12 (Prague, 1939–1940), vol. 6, part 1, p. 455. For an English translation, see "Structuralism in Esthetics and in Literary Studies" in this book.

7. "Romantické všeslovanství—nová slavistika" [Romantic panslavism—new slavistics], *Čin*, 1 (1929–1930), 11. Quoted from the partial English translation in R. Jakobson, "Retrospect," *Selected Writings* (The Hague, 1971), vol. 2, pp. 711–712.

8. V. Mathesius, "Funkční lingvistika," *Sborník přednášek proslovených na prvním sjezdu čsl. profesorů filosofie, filologie a historie v Praze 3.–7. dubna 1929* (Prague, 1929), pp. 118–130; P. Bogatyřev, "Funkčno-štrukturálná metoda a iné metody etnografie a folkloristiky," *Slovenské Pohl'ady*, 51 (1935), 550–558; J. Mukařovský, *Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty* (Prague, 1936), English translation by M. E. Suino (Ann Arbor, 1970).

9. E. W. Bruss, "The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský," *Comparative Literature*, 31 (1979), 173.