

## When Marxism Met Structuralism for the First Time: Prague, 1934

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**Abstract:** On December 10, 1934, the Prague Linguistic Circle, spearheading a structuralist approach to the study of language and literature, convened a public conference to discuss a lengthy study by the Circle's member, Jan Mukařovský, devoted to an early 19th century poem "On the Sublimity of Nature" by Milota Zdirad Polák. This text served as a testing ground for Mukařovský's hypothesis about the dual motivation of every literary change: the internal one—the developmental dynamism of the literary system, and the external one—the needs of other social domains with which literature interacts. Among the discussants at the meeting was a young critic, Závěš Kalandra, who scrutinized Mukařovský's paper from a Marxist perspective. Two objections against the structuralist method of literary history he raised concerned its reification of the creative subject, and its disregard for the economic base which in a mediated way impacts all phenomena belonging to the ideological superstructure.

**Keywords:** Jan Mukařovský, Závěš Kalandra, structuralism, Marxism, literary history

### 马克思主义与结构主义的初遇：布拉格，1934

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**摘要:** 1934年12月10日，结构主义语言与文学研究的先锋——布拉格语言学会召开了一次会议，专论学会成员扬·穆卡洛夫斯基的长期研究成果。穆卡洛夫斯基主要研究19世纪早期米洛塔·

波拉克的诗歌《论自然的崇高》。该诗歌是穆卡洛夫斯基假设验证的试验场，他假设每种文学变化都具备双重动机：内在动机即文学系统发展动力，而外在动机则是社会领域中与文学互相影响的其他需求。其中一位与会者，一位年轻的批评家查维斯·卡兰德拉从马克思主义视角审视了穆卡洛夫斯基的论文。他提出了两种反对结构主义文学史研究方法的观点，即该方法关注于创造主体的物化，以及忽视影响着意识形态上层建筑中所有现象的经济基础之中介作用。

**关键词：**扬·穆卡洛夫斯基，查维斯·卡兰德拉，结构主义，马克思主义，文学史

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*Il est beau [...] comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie!*

—Comte de Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*.

The concept of Structuralism was coined by Roman Jakobson in 1929 in a brief newspaper report about the First International Congress of Slavic Philologists that convened in Prague that year. He was referring to “the leading idea of present-day scholarship in its most various manifestations” which treats “any set of phenomena[...]not as a mechanical agglomeration but as a structural whole, and the basic task is to reveal the inner[...]laws of the system” (Jakobson, 1971, p. 711). According to Jakobson it was the output of the Prague Linguistic Circle (est. 1926) which best represented this idea in the fields of linguistics and poetics.

The decisive for the rise of Structuralism was the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, published posthumously by his pupils in 1916. The Prague Structuralists fully subscribed to the Saussurean seminal postulate that each and every utterance (*parole*) is an implementation of an immaterial system of linguistic norms shared by the speakers of a given tongue (*langue*) and they, significantly, extended this insight to the study of all cultural phenomena. But they modified the initial Saussurean conception of *langue* in several ways. Let me

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point out just two of such revisions that are important for my subsequent argument. The members of the Circle, first of all, rejected Saussure's split of linguistics into its synchronic and diachronic branches with his absolute preference for the former. System and evolution, they maintained, cannot be separated: every system has its history and this history is systemic, governed by the system's developmental needs. According to this view, language is not a harmonious, symmetrical whole but an ongoing struggle between revolutionary tendencies aiming to alter the *status quo* and the conservative trends set on preserving it. At any moment the system is both balanced and imbalanced: it is simultaneously a state and a mutation. The ruptures in previous equilibriums coexist with the equilibriums that mended these ruptures, and all of them point to subsequent changes that will redress this situation in the future.

The second difference between Saussure and the Praguers concerned the uniform homogeneity of *langue*, the quality that the Swiss linguist imputed to it. In contrast to Saussure the Structuralists viewed language as a versatile tool of communication—the means-end mechanism—serving to attain a number of particular purposes: referential, appellative, emotive, etc. Each of these “functional dialects” is governed, and they are maintained, by a set of norms suitable for achieving the intended goal. The overall linguistic code, then, is not a singular system identically valid for each and every utterance but a system of systems: a dynamic structure of functional sub-codes of limited applicability whose hierarchy changes according to the dominant function of the given discourse (see, Prague Linguistic Circle, 1982).

From these dialects, the Circle's members paid special attention to the language in aesthetic function, i. e., poetic language, which, in their opinion, differed from other functional dialects in three respects. While in other types of discourse, language is oriented toward extra-linguistic phenomena (speaker, addressee, referent), in poetic language the message itself occupies the center of attention. Utterance is dissolved into its constitutive elements (from phonological to syntactic) which are subsequently reassembled according to the specifications of a given literary tradition. Furthermore, the set toward the linguistic message itself disrupts the way the

poetic sign signifies. If a practical language emphasizes the identity of the signifier and the signified ( $A \equiv A_1$ ), poetic language upends such a conventional sameness and thrives on the actual difference between the two ( $A \neq A_1$ ). Finally, of all functional dialects, poetic language, driven by an incessant impulse to rejuvenate itself (“defamiliarization” in the Russian Formalists’ parlance), challenges most effectively existing norms and serves as the engine of linguistic development.

After this *ad hoc* summary of the Prague School’s theoretical tenets I should turn to the subject of my presentation: Závěš Kalandra’s Marxist critique of Jan Mukařovský’s Structuralist analyses of an early-19<sup>th</sup>-century poem “On the Sublimity of Nature” by the nowadays almost forgotten Matěj Milota Zdirad Polák (1788–1856). But to fully contextualize it, permit me to say a few words about the two protagonists with life stories quite unlike each other. Mukařovský (1891–1975), a founding member of the Prague Circle, was a typical academic connected throughout most of his career with Charles University where he became a full professor in 1945. His copious publications not only deal with literary studies and general aesthetics but also with cinema, architecture, and theater. Mukařovský joined the Party in 1946 and after the Communist revolution (1948) he publically repudiated his Structuralist past receiving in exchange the highest academic accolades. But his Marxist works (in which he does not quote Marx once) are considered greatly inferior to his pre-War output and his Marxist conversion seemed to be more matter of political opportunism than of genuine intellectual development.

An eleven-year younger Závěš Kalandra (1902–1950), on the other hand, never completed his university education. He studied philosophy in Prague and for two years in Berlin but did not submit his finished doctoral thesis on Parmenides for a degree. After joining the Communist Party in 1923 Kalandra became a regular contributor to numerous leftist and avant-garde periodicals and after 1929, he served as an editor of the Communist press. In the mid-thirties, with the outbreak of the confessional trials in Moscow, he became a vociferous detractor of Stalinist justice for which he was expelled from the Party in 1936. Kalandra spent World War II in the Nazi

concentration camps, and, after 1945, he returned to scholarship, authoring a critically acclaimed monograph on Czech paganism (Kalandra, 1947). In 1950, however, he was arrested on a trumped-up charge of high treason, sentenced to death and duly executed.

Mukařovský's study of 1934 merits our attention for a number of reasons. It was, first of all, considered at that time a watershed in the Circle's intellectual history. For a while after its inception, Structuralist criticism operated very much in the shadow of the Russian Formalist tradition. The transmission of Formalist ideas was facilitated above all by the presence of Roman Jakobson (a former member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle) and also by the lectures of several prominent Formalists delivered in Prague in the 1920s. The analyses of Polák's poem was considered the first sustained attempt to overcome a purely immanent approach to literary evolution—the hallmark of Formalism—making social context an integral component of the history of verbal art. How successful it was we will assess later but for the contemporaries, this constituted a radical departure from the previous practice. Secondly, Mukařovský's treatise elicited a lively debate among Czech philologists about the merits of the Structuralist approach, thus, boosting considerably the reputation of this relatively new “-ism” among the reading public. And Kalandra's “About a Method of Literary History” enriched this theoretical polyphony with a Marxist voice (Kalandra, 1994). Yet, before presenting his critique, I must summarize in the most economical way the main theses of Mukařovský's argument to which Kalandra was reacting against.

The very choice of a rather obscure pre-Romantic poem by a minor Czech writer, comparable in its style to, say, James Thomson's *Seasons*, as a subject of a lengthy, detailed analyses was on Mukařovský's part a programmatic statement. He was not, as he declared, concerned with the aesthetic value of the text either for its first readers or for the current ones, because both are, for obvious reasons, overtly limited. A literary historian deals, Mukařovský opined, with a value of a different kind. This he termed the developmental significance of the text: “the work's relation to the dynamism of evolution”, i. e., its contribution to the change of the literary system. From such a perspective, then, “the work which in some manner reshuffled the structure of the

preceding period appears as a positive value, whereas the work that accepted that structure without change appears as a negative value” (Mukařovský, 1982, p. 447). And Polák’s descriptive poem, despite its abstruse vocabulary and convoluted syntax (or, perhaps, because of it), was in the history of Czech literature. Mukařovský illustrated convincingly, a step forward: if not exactly the beginning of a new epoch, then definitely the passageway toward it.

“If we are to grasp the literary process in its entire complexity and simultaneously in its regularity,” declared Mukařovský (1982, p. 511), “we must accept as our working hypothesis the dual impetus for every phenomenon: whether at the boundary of the literary structure and other series (the external impulse) or within it (interrelatedness of its components). But, as Kalandra observed, despite this generally acceptable premise, Mukařovský’s analysis of Polák ultimately privileges the latter over the former. Let me explain.

Focusing on the developmental trends of Czech poetry in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mukařovský pointed out that the debut of “Sublimity of Nature” occurred at the moment of the important versification crisis: the transition from syllabic to syllabo-tonic metrics. Polák sided with the new tendency and, as Mukařovský’s statistics clearly illustrated, his poem, insofar as its metrical impulse indicates, was a sixteen-syllabic trochee. But this fact alone would hardly make Polák an innovator. His evolutionary impact rests, according to Mukařovský, in something else. To wit: the first practitioners of the Czech syllabo-tonic versification in whose stead Polák followed were concerned above all with foregrounding the regularity of the meter, making sure that every single downbeat was actually accentuated, which in Czech, with an obligatory verbal stress on the first syllable, was rather easy to do for trochee. In this language, any string of two-syllabic words is by default trochaic. If overused, however, this led to a boring rhythmic monotony, a fully predictable coincidence of the foot and the word boundaries. Polák’s contribution rested in his ability to break this bond, syncopating the dipodic verse, making thus the Czech trochee rhythmically more diverse than before. He achieved this break by saturating his verse with polysyllabic words. But since, in the Czech vocabulary, two-syllabic words are the prevalent lexical

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material, he was forced to coin unusually lengthy neologisms—mostly substitutions for shorter synonyms—remedying this deficiency. Such freaks of morphology had, in turn, a peculiar bearing on the overall theme of the poem: the picturesque description of Nature. Polák’s newfangled coinages referred as a rule indirectly: invoking, for example, the abstract quality of a signified object instead of employing a proper designation (“stonness” for a “stone”). In fact, the text contains an extraordinary quantity of descriptive periphrases (Mukařovský lists many types of them) which to some degree corresponds to the poem’s overall genre: the depiction of Nature’s sublimity.

But this line of argument, explaining the structure of Polák’s texts exclusively in terms of the inner developmental logic of the Czech literary system at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was clearly insufficient insofar as it turned a blind eye to the social context to which this poem reacted. It had to be augmented by the sociological interpretation of its origin. As you probably know, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Czech lands were part of the multinational Habsburg empire. But rapid industrialization and modernization around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century triggered in that country (as elsewhere in Europe) the rise of centrifugal nationalism. Czech historians refer to this period as “the National Awakening”, the drive spearheaded by a handful of newborn patriots to make the local population nationally self-aware as an ethnically autonomous group with distinct historical and cultural characteristics. An important component of this project was raising the intellectual niveau of Czech language—the ultimate marker of national identity—which after many years of neglect atrophied to a mere peasant vernacular (German was the privileged tongue). In this project, literature played an indispensable role. As Mukařovský (1982, p. 510) put it: “Polák strove for a ‘high-brow’ and exclusive poetry which was supposed to attract to the nationalist ideology the ‘higher’ strata of society; the generic features of descriptive poetry facilitated the creation of such a work.” And this, moreover, explains his selection of the lofty theme borrowed from foreign sources with no precedent in the Czech literary system.

At this point, it seems, Mukařovský succeeded in verifying his “working hypothesis”. He linked the structure of Polák’s text simultaneously to both:

the developmental dynamism of the Czech versification, and, at the same time, the ideological needs of the emerging Czech nation. But was this truly so? The quantitative disproportion between the poetic and the sociological parts of his study was patent at the first glance. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Mukařovský's inquiry was about literary history with the social aspect of the poem just appended for the sake of the above stated hypothesis. And the author, it must be stressed, was well aware of this issue. As a literary historian, Mukařovský argued, he was concerned primarily with the evolution of verbal art. In this sphere of human praxis "the aesthetic function which makes a poetic work poetic [...] is *de jure* dominant", albeit "*de facto* it might be pushed out of this position by another function" (1982, p. 506). But it is precisely the dominance of aesthetic that guarantees literature its artistic identity and the continuity of its history. "The literary historical research must take into account that external interventions—whether successively or simultaneously—can come from different corners [...] and can pertain not only to the theme but also to any other component of the [literary] structure." Yet, and this was Mukařovský's ultimate point, "the unity of development is not maintained by the congruity or the unidirectionality of these external interventions but by the regularity of the inner dynamism of literature itself" (1982, p. 505).

Záviš Kalandra delivered his critique of Mukařovský's analysis, together with several other discussants, at the Circle's debate devoted to the methodological issues of this study on December 10, 1934. At the onset I must stress that he lauded certain aspects of Mukařovský's pioneering project. By being aware of the fact that literature does not evolve in a social vacuum stated Kalandra (1994, p. 10), "he towers high above the run of the mill practitioners of the bourgeois literary history". Moreover, "the Marxist methodology need not to modify at all the perfect tools Mukařovský applies to the 'immanent' literary analyses of an actual work of a particular poet" as long as "this is not taken for a proof that the autonomous laws of literary evolution exist" (1994, p. 11). And finally, commenting on "Mukařovský's *struggle* for method", Kalandra summed up: "Marxism would welcome if his struggle led this excellent linguist and literary historian to the method of



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dialectical materialism that could serve him as a *reliable* guide.” (1994, p. 15) Viewed in the rear mirror of history, though, this wish seems suffused with an ironic tinge.

The Marxist criticism of the Structuralist method by Kalandra was two-pronged. The first part concerned the difficult question of the relation between the material basis and ideological superstructure. Kalandra rejected Mukařovský's bifurcation of the impulses driving the literary evolution into “internal” and “external” series each with its own immanent development as blatantly “mechanical” invoking instead Mukařovský's category “structure of structures” which, in his view, approximated more adequately the way literature incorporates into the broad social context.<sup>①</sup> And with the same vigor, he assailed the “working hypothesis” about the dual impetus of every change with “the regularity of the inner dynamism of literature itself” guaranteeing “the unity of [its] development. The continuity of literary development” he maintained, is located much deeper, “in the evolution of *economy* that furnishes the *common* ground for all activity and behavior of every ‘real individual’ as Marx and Engels always spoke of him/her” (1994, p. 11). This, however, did not imply Kalandra's succumbing to what he called derisively “the vulgar pseudo-Marxist conception of literary history as a ‘copy’ of the economic development” (1994, p. 10). For genuine Marxism, Kalandra invoked Friedrich Engels' authority on this issue, interaction between economics and the ideological spheres like philosophy and literature was never causally direct but always mediated by many factors operating in between them:

“I consider the ultimate supremacy of economic development established in these spheres too,” wrote Engels to Conrad Schmidt in 1890, “but it comes to pass within conditions imposed by the particular

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<sup>①</sup> The concept “structure of structures”, is a reformulation of the linguistic “system of systems” applicable to the study of culture. According to Mukařovský(1982, p. 505), “[t]he developmental series formed by the dynamics of the individual structures changing in time (e. g., political, economical, ideological, literary structure) [...] comprise the structure of a higher order of which they are components. And this structure of structures has its own hierarchy and its dominant (the prevailing series)” also always shifting in time.

sphere itself: in philosophy, for instance, through the operation of economic influences (which again generally only act under political, etc., disguises) upon the existing philosophic material handed down by predecessors. Here economy creates nothing absolutely new (*a novo*), but it determines the way in which the existing material of thought is altered and further developed, and that too for the most part indirectly, for it is the political, legal and moral reflexes which exercise the greatest direct influence upon philosophy” (Engels, 1890b; Kalandra, 1994, pp. 10—11).<sup>①</sup>

But before explaining how Kalandra conceptualized such a mediation in the literary process, let me first introduce what he considered the second fallacy of Mukarovsky's analysis. This lengthy quote makes it explicit:

What Dr. Mukarovsky's method *eliminates* completely, bans from the purview of criticism, is the “real individual” reacting to the real situation in the class society of human beings. Indeed, from this conception which strives to be at every step of its analyses mathematically precise and in each of its evolutionary synthesis transparently unequivocal, from this method wishing to proceed *more geometrico*, emanates the *fear of an individual*, of an authentic individual: that inscrutable animal with its welter of whims, fears, talents and deficiencies—with the legion of idiosyncrasies that cannot be fitted into the exact formulas of the “autonomous” literary development but can be studied in their regularity and reactions only and only if projected into an actual framework of a specific society, its economic structure and class struggles. (1994, p. 12)

To a group well versed in Marxism-Leninism, I need not explain the gist of Kalandra's censure. He was accusing the Structuralist critic with what George Lukács termed the reification—the tendency of bourgeois philosophy and social sciences to treat human relations and subjects as inanimate, passive objects. In the Lukácsian understanding, reification was ineluctably, but not exclusively, linked to the capitalist mode of production—especially to its most advanced phase—where the division and the mechanization of labor

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<sup>①</sup> For a similar assertion see Engels, 1890a.

fragmented the organic bond between workers and their output rendering the multifaceted products of human labor, capable of satisfying a variety of personal needs, into abstract commodities appreciated solely on the basis of their price. Under these conditions, the subjects embroiled in mercantile exchange irretrievably lost the natural attitude toward themselves, others, and also their environment perceiving, instead, everything solely in terms of calculable profit. Relevant for my argument, is the spill-over effect of a reified consciousness, its power to impose the arid logic of calculative rationalism across the entire spectrum of cultural praxis. Today, charged Lukács (1971, p. 112), every domain of superstructure (jurisprudence, philosophy, etc.), is affected by this peculiar mental attitude, for “the salient characteristic of the whole epoch is the equation[...]of formal, mathematical, rational knowledge both with knowledge in general and also with ‘our’ knowledge.”

Mukařovský’s stream lining of a fuzzy literary history into a well-ordered system governed by its own reason of which the poet, Polák, is just a machine-like instrument passively implementing its demands fitted well Lukácsian characteristics of the reified bourgeois thought mentioned above. The intellectual source of such an “idealistic ‘immanent development’ of any ideological series with its mystical ‘evolutionary logic’”, Kalandra (1994, p. 12) detected, was the Hegelian dialectics with its concept of “self-motion” (Selbstbewegung)—the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit through the dialectic contradictions. And one of the epigraphs to his Polák study made Mukařovský’s intellectual indebtedness to the great German idealist explicit. The quote came from Hegel’s *Science of Logic* explaining method as the consciousness of the form taken by the inner spontaneous movement of its content.<sup>①</sup> Indeed, what moves the verbal art forward, the Polák analyses illustrates, is not human creativity whatsoever but the “divine dialectics” of the old and the

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① “Fortbewegt Wird das gegebene Gebiet der Erscheinungen Durch den Inhalt dieses Gebietes Selbst, die Dialektik, dieer an ihm selbst hat” (Mukařovský, 1982, p. 439). [The given sphere of phenomena is moved forward by this sphere’s content itself, the dialectic, which it has in itself].

new, the “absolute will” of the literary system to self-rejuvenate.<sup>①</sup> The incalculable individual that could wreak havoc with this assumed predisposition had to be sidelined, if aesthetic rationality was to maximize its utility.

Kalandra’s critique of Mukařovský methodology was radical in the sense Marx ascribed to this word when he wrote that “to be radical” theory must “grasp the root of the matter. But for man, the root is man himself” (Marx, 1844). Rejecting the dualist hypothesis propounded by the Structuralists whose *explanandum* of the actual structure of every literary work involved the duo of external and internal forces, Kalandra proposed a monistic alternative rooted in “man himself”, as the ultimate mediator between the economic and ideological forces: “In reality”, he argued pace Mukařovský, “the *entire* structure [of the Polák’s poem] is determined by a single ‘inside’: Polák’s individuality reacting according to his abilities to the given demands of his social strata. The economic conditions of its existence do not, of itself, create anything. But they determine the *character of changes* to the existing state of poetry. They determine the direction in which the poetic structure will change; *how far reaching* the change will be determined in each concrete case by the given individual’s poetic talent” (Kalandra, 1994, p. 13). In Polák’s case, Kalandra concluded, his role in the development of Czech poetry specified by Mukařovský (a herald of a new epoch but not its founder) did not stem from “some mysterious ‘developmental logic’ mysteriously distributing a sort of roles but, quite simply, from the fact that Polák’s poetic gift was rather middling” (1994, p. 14).

I have reached the end of my brief report on the first polemics of Marxism with the Structuralist criticism. But is this, one must ask, a mere episode from yesteryear, the subject matter for intellectual history, or does it

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① Cf. e.g., Hegel’s relegation of a philosopher to a supplement to the Absolute Spirit which Marx (1845) ridiculed: “Already in Hegel the Absolute Spirit of history ... finds its appropriate expression only in philosophy. The philosopher, however, is only the organ through which the maker of history, the Absolute Spirit, arrives at self – consciousness retrospectively after the movement has ended. The participation of the philosopher in history is reduced to this retrospective consciousness, for the real movement is accomplished by the Absolute Spirit unconsciously. Hence the philosopher appears on the scene *post festum*.”

carry any relevance for the theoretical debates of today? The question of relation between literature and society, it seems, still waits for its full answer despite the valiant efforts of modern cultural sociologists, like Pierre Bourdieu, operating with the sophisticated concepts of “fields”, “habitus” and “cultural capital”.<sup>①</sup> And as long as the interaction between economic basis and ideological superstructure remains a vital problem, our familiarity with the previously proposed solutions is valuable, I believe, if only negatively: to prevent us from repeating past mistakes.

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① For a representative anthology of Bourdieu’s studies of literature and art see, Bourdieu, 1993.

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