

Conference An Homage to Jiří Levý – Ad translationem

I am perhaps the last to remember Jiří Levý, to still have his living form in front of me. He was two years older than me, already in his third year on the faculty when I came to study there. School terms and classes were not that firmly divided back then, so we would meet from time to time, we knew each other, and recognized each other. He was always helpful, friendly, in a good mood. Having finished his studies, he went to teach for a few years at the university of Olomouc. I myself left the faculty for some time after my graduation, and then returned to our department, just as Jiří did. We did meet again, however not for long.

Jiří Levý asked a radical question: *Will literary studies become an exact science?* This is the title of both his 1965 article and the volume of texts that was published four years after his death under the editorship of Miroslav Červenka (LEVÝ, 1971). This question was an inspiration and a challenge at the same time. At that moment Levý was at the end of one development. Kant rejected the possibility of scientific aesthetics and its cognitive values by maintaining that the judgement of taste is not a judgement *a priori*. At the same time, it was him who set the modern bases of the discipline. Then, positivist studies with their demand for causal explanation was gradually dismissed, phenomenology started turning to what is there in our consciousness, and Russian "formalists" further scientified the field by relying on the way of construction of the artifact, on literariness, after which Czech structuralism defined literature by the functional relations inside and outside the work of art.

Levý's question was preceded by a fierce answer, which balanced the focus of Levý's demand by a powerful anti-focus: "The non-exactness of historical spiritual sciences is not a drawback, but a mere fulfillment of a requirement, which is essential for this kind of research" (HEIDEGGER, 2013:13). Martin Heidegger is thus bringing to consequence the hermeneutic notion that humanities, that is sciences of man, are not there to explain but to understand and lead to understanding. Levý and Heidegger, a scientist and a philosopher, both cared about truth, however for the philosopher truth is not correctness. He asks for the opportunity to be, he asks how to be, but not how to take possession of the being. Correctness, not truth, appertains to exact science, therefore "science is not the original course of truth" (HEIDEGGER, 2016:75), the radiance of colours will vanish once we dissect them into wavelengths. This is the reason why Hölderlin "must not be left the mere object of Hölderlinian research according to the literary historians' concepts" (43). Ontology puts itself

against technology, existential participation against object description. In the poetic work, truth is being played out, and it is played out by rhapsody, rhapsody gapes and throws light on reality down to its openness, it reveals the being in its essence, the poet listens to the being, which opens up in the speech. Understanding the truth that is being played out in the work of poetry is the same as answering to the being in which the essence is being revealed. The being is becoming more being when the abode emancipates from the mere preoccupation with the being.

Levý also rejected the false certainty of literary-historical verdicts, however, his objection to the judgements of literary history is different than that of Heidegger. He preferred a reserve founded on observation and allowed for gradual hypotheses that lead to still more adequate conclusions (18). Exact science would have the quality, as well as advantage, of working with fragmentary empirical facts and generalising them with the assistance of mathematical logic and probability index; its evidential value then grows by the rate of formalization and measurability. Where no consequential formalization is possible so far, the experiment comes to aid. We understand the semantic functions from the comparison of the logical relations between the physical, "which is the vehicle of a literary message, and the semantic line, in which the reader becomes conscious of them" (14).

Hermeneutics insists on the difference between humanities and natural sciences. Levý believed that modern logic would relieve this contrast by a methodological specification of the sciences of man. The contributing disciplines were to be cybernetics and theory of information. "Theory of information does not see the work of art as a static system whose internal relations can be observed by various perspectives, but as an arrangement of components that realises itself in time, which is the result of *selective* and *combinative* activities of the author, and which is at the same time the vehicle of certain information, which the addressee decodes with the shifts which are given chiefly by the differences between the codes of the author and the reader" (14).

The attitudes are contradictory. They only agree upon the notion that the poem resists our cognitive possibilities. According to Levý, this limitation is only temporary: so far we are not capable of explaining neither the essence of a writer's work nor the nature of the reader's experience by the aid of mathematics. As we are in the preparatory stadium, the current results are inevitably partial, and they cannot do justice to the essence of literature by themselves. Their validity in terms of meanings and values can be expressed only as part of higher, more complex wholes. It is in the nature of things, that form is more accessible to accurate description than content. Heidegger and Levý would perhaps agree, though in highly

individual ways, that the work of art is given as something that is real only in its execution; the execution is impressed in the work, and it stands out as “the uniqueness of what it is”; “the work of art is exactly the fact, that it *is* like that, something unusual” (HEIDEGGER, 2016: 80). The research which determines the being of the work, according to Heidegger, attempts to get close to the work's impartiality, and so it means to understand the work from its createdness, its executedness. The work tears down to open overtness, and at the same time it escapes that, which is considered common or insists on subservience. It changes the relations with the world and the earth, it deconstructs what has until now been considered obvious, the up-to-now and the usual becomes non-being, its possibility of being a measure wanes. This, let us call it Heideggerian form of "estrangement", is lead to ontological and communicational results. The work and its effect rest in the change of being. Then, the work is not a work without those who respond to its truth. It is their question and antithesis. In the Postscript to *The Origin of the Work of Art*, it is written: "What is art, is one of the questions, to which no answers are provided in the discussion, in spite of the multiple occasions for questioning." (113). And in the Epilogue to the same: "There is a long way to go until we solve this puzzle. Our task is to perceive the puzzle." (101) Thus we only get a bit closer to the subject, and both of the advocates give their opinion with genuine humbleness.

What does knowledge of the literary text mean, and what are its limits? When and how do we transcend them? For Heidegger, objectivity and objective science is an obstacle towards the understanding of poetry. Hermeneutics deconstructed the demand upon the objectivity of interpretation: what can be grasped scientifically? What we read is something else then only constructs. By scientification, do we not expose ourselves to the danger of reducing reading to a system of rules? Therefore, to the detection of what repeats itself? Do we not find out the truth only after we have turned off the track of rules, and turned to what is unaccountable and improbable? Kant's explicit dismissal of scientific aesthetics itself was already an acknowledgement that scientific cognition can never encompass all of reality.

It is an argument between a philosopher and a literary theoretician, but it is also a difference or a shift between the general theory and the explication of concrete texts. Levý's short speech, or even a practical focus, on the needs of a diseurs, is about how the artist forms their linguistic material according to rhythmic, prosodic, and compositional principles. It starts on a highly pronounced technical note: "Art's means as a craft stem from the technology of the material" (259). But the formal key (which is called a dominant semantical-formal principle, or a constructive principle with its semantic correlatives) leads us to the correct reading, it invites us to open the text and invigorate its semantic function in the unity of

content and execution, the said opening being impersonal. Levý often likes to put to comparison two authors or works, or several different translations, he compares various translations of Mácha's *Máj* or Czech translations of Shakespeare's works, but subjects of comparison are also Čapek's *The Brigand* and Shakespeare, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, Whitman and Eliot. Regardless of the time remoteness between Čapek and Shakespeare, or the differences in the way dramatic conflict is being resolved, in some respects, their dramatic conflicts seem to be close, and their characters, situations, and imagination seem to be comparable. His analysis of Shakespeare's verses and their Czech translations is in close relation to their stage performance, and that which is, strictly speaking, numerical data and rough indicator, becomes an accurate characteristic in a given context. Levý explains this relationship thus: "it is not a problem to determine the metre of a poem, but its rhythmical individuality" (279). In Jonson's works, a clear-cut basic situation develops gradually through a string of clear reactions to itself, therefore the character is unequivocally set as a general type defined by a single trait, which recurs throughout the play. In Shakespeare's works, the essence of the character is being revealed in the course of the play, and the conflict constantly permutes in utterly different scenes. Therefore, the structure of the play with its ideological and formal principle strongly predicates of the playwright's relation to reality, the difference being not only in technique but also in human relations. In Jonson's works each character is isolated, in Shakespeare's works, the drama tends towards converging even those characters that were initially remote to one another.

The Jonsonian drama as a typological echo will be mentioned again in the essay on Whitmanian lyrical poetry, where both are attributed a cumulative method of summary: Walt Whitman "wrote down and counted as a mathematician". In the light of the fact that Levý incorporated statistics and mathematics into his scholarly work, we can read the following passage as self-referential: "Statistics can record only the existence and quantity of one kind of phenomenon, or the one attribute that is, from statistical point of view, essential (pertinence to a certain type). The quality of the parts dissolves, and one counts on their average value. This is the essence of Whitman's political and aesthetic view, of his democratism and anti-aestheticism" (399). Levý accepts Whitman's poetic way, he recognises his poetic greatness, and at the same time he criticises the method for giving way to the average, in which "the quality of the parts dissolves." He critically brings Whitman's quantitative way in relation to modern science and philosophy, as well as the nature of economic production in capitalism. He admits the greatness to this quantitative poet, and yet he is carefully facing himself with his opposite. T.S. Eliot's aim is "to get clear of the 'uncertainty' of the objective world and

get to the 'certainty' of the metaphysic reality" (449), "to undermine the reader's faith in objective reality" (439). Then he presents evidence on how this dichotomy is mirrored by a constant tampering with the regular scheme, a contrast between the term and its negation, a merging of antipoles, a synthesis of antitheses, an identity of differences, a paradox.

Levý frees the interpretation of literature from the reign of subjective impressions and the pressure of ideological speculation. He dissects the literary process into a series of choices and decisions both on the side of the author and during the reception process. The rational analysis seems to switch "the attention of literary studies from general reflexions and ill-founded verdicts to a genuine interest in the concrete development of the aesthetic process, as well as the structure of aesthetic objects" (22). It lays out the artistic message in components that are combined according to certain rules, which are documented in the text, and are verifiable by the text itself. The syntactic and semantic construct is as numerable as possible, however, it is not an accumulation of symptomless units, but a context which engulfs the author, the readers, and the shared world. Levý made use of logical and formalisational procedures, relied on machine processors for permutational calculations, he put his trust in sets and schemes, from which he gathered his findings and hypotheses, while still being aware of the limitations of these practices in both artistic and scientific work. Levý's conclusions are deliberately partial and temporary. He repeatedly points out the preliminariness of the present state. He insists that aesthetic categories are in their essence qualitative, and therefore cannot be described in their entirety by using quantitative terms only. "[...] so far the theory of information is not capable of articulating reliable criteria for aesthetic value. It is nonetheless useful as an auxiliary method for accurate description of a work's internal structure [...], but for the time being it cannot serve as a methodological basis for the general theory of literature [...]" (68). The advantage of this provisionality lies in its openness. Levý does not consider translation "a combination of technical means," his linguistic views take into account the philosophical background, and he considers the preservation of the original in its individuality an essential value in translation. He also included the question of scientific relevance: "Will translation theory be useful to the translators?" (147).

Use is one thing, value is another. Levý quotes Mukařovský in agreement, that "in every evaluation there is an element of subjectivity", therefore if an individual is evaluating an object from a completely unique perspective, "the evaluation cannot abide by any rules, and it depends entirely on the individual's freedom of judgement [...] Although the norm is aiming at absolute obligation, it can never achieve the validity of the law of nature." (MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 27-28, LEVÝ 103-104). Both of them hold individual performance higher than general rule.

Mukařovský allows for the parallelism of more than one applicable norm, he accepts and values the violation of the norm; Levý considers the act of evaluation and individual aesthetic norms to be “the concrete behaviour of an abstract system” (104). The order that we feel in art and literature does not have the weight nor the obligation of the law of nature, it is hypothetical and tentative, it is exposed to social and individual premises and requirements, and thus to interpretations.

It seems that literature puts before its interpreters a choice between autonomy of accurate cognition and a possible understanding. The theoretician and the philosopher have set up a differential which is the most tender where one explains literature in mathematical, and the other in existential terms. While science is relying upon verifiability of its rational propositions about the real world, philosophy lacks such certainty. The Heideggerian harmony, this in-tuneness is supposed to disentangle one from the *forgetfulness of being*, whereas technical observation puts being, which is incalculable, aside, in the interest of the illusion of accurate truth. Heidegger wanted to avoid the Descartes-like clear and visible cognition, as well as the objectivization that arises from it, which, being a mere cover for the assertion of the subject, shall wipe everything into hollow materialness and manipulation. The conflict sharpened the moment power switched to using codes, and programming and machine intelligence started to determine their rules, in a development which requires a subjugation of reality and is attached to individual truths in utilitarian sense. The requirement of exactness in art and literature can seem risky in regards to the natural hypotheticalness of the propositions, it can overestimate description and technical terminology regardless of the fact that such interpretation can steer literature away from the everyday readers' experience. However, the opposite view can be exclusive as well, when it sharpens and narrows the penetration into a work of poetry down to the choice of one type of rhapsody. We can become victims of abstract methodology in either of these approaches. When does the subject become a determined, measurable object, and when do we come out from objectivity and into a world which is ours? When do we look for an unambiguous support in the personal states and moods, and when does poetry combine the certainty and the uncertainty, thus challenging one to interpret individual accomplishment?

There is one unsettled gap left between Levý and Heidegger, yet are not the answers good enough, only to give way for new questions? Paul Ricoeur agrees with Heidegger as far as we preliminary view artistic discourse as a “project”, i.e. a blueprint of the new being of man in the world (RICOEUR, 1997: 56). He describes the dialectics of interpretative reading as a phase of a one and only process, a move from comprehension to explaining, and then a

move from explaining to understanding. Comprehension will be first a naive grasp of the meaning of a text as a whole, and then the meaning will be supported by explanatory processes, so understanding becomes a restructured way of the initial comprehension. At the beginning, comprehension is conjecture, which at the end assumes the form of "appropriation", which is the answer to "the type of distance connected with the full objectification of a text. Explanation, therefore, appears to be an intermediate between two degrees of comprehension [also between structuralism and hermeneutics?]. The moment we isolate it from these concrete processes, it becomes sheer abstraction, an artefact of methodology" (101-102).

This dual motion of cognition does not have to be mutually eliminative, even though they do not blend. Just as arts are not the same, and they do not exclude each other, the boundary between their interpreters gives way to the rise of what is promised and prompted in conflicting efforts. Levý's exactidisation of literary studies is not philosophical, but – same as Czech structuralism – methodological, and it makes it possible to understand literature and literary works in their uniqueness as well as universality, in their ambivalence as well as in the symbiosis with the new possibilities of reading, theory, and analysis. In the unity of explanation and understanding, he allows surmises of what is denominable and calculable into contexts and wholes, some of which may be punishable competences of both author and interpreter, on the verge of terminological explicitness and rationality. If a finding from natural sciences can have validity of a law, the judgement of art is indeed often normative, but it also asks for interpretation, which is hypothetical. While formal logic is unambiguous, "natural" speech is certainly not. The conflict of this dual approach acquires the form of an encounter on the border of the unknown. The difference may not be unbridgeable from the both of the sides, but it tends towards bridging the more we become aware of the shortcomings.

In 2010 Czech biologists published a volume called *The Linguistic Metaphor of the Live*. I was intrigued by how they had matched life with linguistic metaphor, and how can a biologist entertain themselves with Heidegger in a comprehensive and repetitive manner: how they can introduce scientific thoughts in a way that is close to poetry, how they can evoke the relationship between exactitude and what is immeasurable. It seems to be an urge coming directly from the needs of one's science. Mark you, if a biologist says, that "artificial intelligence and formal languages belong to a category [...] other than life" (MARKOŠ, 2010: 96), the schism between natural and spiritual sciences is shaken once more.

Or let us put this differently. Ivo Osolsobě, who was close to Jiří Levý, and worked with him on the Group for Exact Methods and Interdisciplinary Relations, has expressed his admiration of aesthetician and cryptosemiotician Otakar Zich, while mentioning that Zich was also a mathematician, and pointing out that while he was using the “irrational” term semantic idea, he described how it works in an utterly rational, logical way. (OSOLSOBĚ, 2002: 224).

Jiří Levý was a big initiator. When I look back to his work, I can hardly believe, that his creative life was disrupted in his 40s. What he left us, is a magnificent torso. Who knows what would have come next?!

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