

In Search of a New Understanding of Barthes's Concept of the Index

Original Study

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Abstract: Within the broad tradition of structuralism there are some differences in the treatment of extra-textual reality, character motivation, and the importance of plot. The article proposes some reconciliation between the Prague School and French narratology, centred around a revision of the concept of “index”. It also asserts a fundamental continuity between the devices of poetic language and those of narrative prose. In the first section of the paper it is shown that, when Roland Barthes adapts the notion of the index to his structural narratology, he vacillates somewhat about its definition and application, sometimes associating it with metaphor and sometimes with metonymy. A consistent reflection upon Barthes's ambivalent use of the index makes it possible to describe narrative atmosphere as well as character psychology, but still within the parameters of structuralism. This reflection yields an understanding of index that is less formalistic and more compatible with the theorization of the Prague School. The second part of the paper plays out some applications of this redefined index and poetic language for Czech literature, including examples from Vladislav Vančura and Milan Kundera.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, index, narratology, metaphor, poetic language, Jan Mukařovský,

1. BARTHES'S MIXED USE OF THE TERM “INDEX”

Roland Barthes initially defines¹ the term “index” in his *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative* (1966) and later returns to it within different contexts and on other occasions in his essays.² However, even on these later occasions he does not present a distinct and exhaustive definition. Barthes characterises the index as a certain type of descriptive element with implicit

semantics, which require explanation in the interpretation. In addition to the index (with an opaque referent) he introduces another type of descriptive element with a clear referent, which he terms the “informant” (Barthes 1977c, 96). Besides these elements, which are of negligible importance for the semantics of the literary work, he defines further narrative units, whose significance he invests in the dynamics of the events (“fabula”, “narrative”): these

1 It is a basic premise of this text that the way Barthes discusses the “index” in *Elements of Semiology* (1964) is more of a comparative nature (he first understands the notion of “index” as a “rival” to the notion of “sign” and characterizes it in relation to how other authors, including Peirce, Hegel, Jung and Wallon, speak of it). It should be added that this analysis of Barthes is strongly influenced by the contemporary authority of R. Jakobson and carries with it a number of problematic aspects: among others, an inaccurate assessment of Peirce's semiotics. From the point of view of this paper, therefore, the later texts in which Barthes works with the concept of index in his own (“displaced”) way are more important. Barthes's aim in this perspective can be seen as to “recuperate” the notion of index as a term for literary description by defining it strictly without causation/referent.

2 Especially in *The Reality Effect* (Barthes 1989b) and *The Discourse of History* (Barthes 1989a).

he terms “nuclei” and “catalysts”. The nucleus represents the plot element *par excellence* (the turning point of the plot), whereas the catalyst is merely a filling between two plot elements. We can therefore also characterise the catalyst as a descriptive element of its type, since it is derived from its relationship to the plot, and it is therefore not an independent entity. By contrast, indices and informants do manifest such independence; the former create a certain atmosphere, while the latter anchor the narrative in reality (Barthes 1977c, 96).

Let us also recall that Barthes divides the narrative into three descriptive levels: “function”, “action” and “narration” (Barthes 1977c). At the same time, the traditional formalist division and later also the division of narratology assign two descriptive levels (“fabula” and “syuzhet” in formalism, “story” and “discourse” in narratology)³. Nuclei and catalysts as units are located only on the level of function. Informants and indices integrate the levels of function and action. The semantics of the nuclei and catalysts is constituted on the basis of metonymy (their sanction is syntagmatic), while the semantics of indices is metaphorical (their sanction is paradigmatic).

For a general designation of the four above-described narrative units, Roland Barthes uses the term “function”. He refers to the central concept from Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), and in his analysis also takes as his basis Tomashevsky’s 1968 essay *Thematics*.⁴ From *Thematics* he adopts the division into “static” (catalysts, indices, informants) and “dynamic” elements (nuclei). He also draws upon Tomashevsky’s division into “bound” (nuclei and in their way also catalysts, since their presence indicates the proximity of a nucleus) and “free” motifs (indices, informants). The bound nature of a motif indicates its subordination to the plot sequence (“Theft cannot take place before the door is forced” – Propp 1968, 22), while the freedom of a motif consists in the simple fact that it may appear at any point in the narrative. However, even the selection of free motifs is not entirely free, since it is subordinate to the various literary schools and traditions (see Tomashevsky)⁵, which prefer specific artistic devices and selected thematic components. Thus, an index is both free to appear anywhere in the narrative, while being referentially immobile.

Barthes further deals with the index in later texts, such as *The Discourse of History* (Barthes 1989a[1967]), *The Reality Effect* (Barthes 1989b[1968]), and *The Struggle With the Angel* (1972, Barthes 1977e). In these texts he makes partial revisions or repetitions of what he had previously stated in the *Introduction*, or even expands upon the definition. In *The Discourse of History* (1989a), with regard to the extrapolation of the narrative, Barthes gravitates towards the metaphorical and lyrical on one hand and the metonymic and the epic on the other. His

division⁶ is inspired by Roman Jakobson’s celebrated study of aphasia (Jakobson 1971). Although Barthes does not refer explicitly to Jakobson’s study, he is clearly familiar with it, since this concerns the second study from the French edition (Jakobson 1963), from which he cites Jakobson’s ninth essay. The fact that Barthes is somewhat casual with regard to citing his sources of inspiration is not important for this argument. What is of fundamental importance is that this inferred inspiration by Jakobson’s study enables us to relate the index more distinctly to the metaphorical, and thus also to the devices of poetic language, than could be deduced from his *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative*. I would like to illustrate Barthes’s interpretative shift, in which he rehabilitates the significance of the index, with two quotes from *The Discourse of History*.

The first class covers all the segments of discourse which refer to an implicit signified, according to a metaphorical process; thus, Michelet describes the motley of garments, the fading of blazons, and the mixture of architectural styles at the beginning of the fifteenth century as so many signifiers of a single signified, which is the moral division of the waning Middle Ages; this class is that of indices, or more precisely of signs (a very abundant class in the classical novel). (Barthes 1989a, 135)

In this quote, we can recall how Barthes understands the index, namely, that it concerns signifiers which have an implicit meaning and which are connected with signifieds by means of metaphor; and at the same time we can also observe a certain shift of definition. As Barthes has argued, various social phenomena (the motley of garments, the fading of blazons, and the mixture of architectural styles) point to one meaning, to a moral temper. A certain social climate, moral temper etc., are manifested in indices. We may now understand the index (by contrast with the *Introduction*) indeed as an index proper, since there is a causal relationship between signifier and signified. In the above example, indicial signifiers are a manifestation of a certain temper of the subject. The example Barthes presents here is clear and legible. I believe that it is from this that we can form a better understanding of the extent to which the index is a certain trace of the subject. The example that Barthes presents in his *Introduction* is less clear.

To say that through the window of the office where Bond is on duty the moon can be seen half-hidden by thick billowing clouds, is to index a stormy summer night, this deduction in turn forming an index of atmosphere with reference to the heavy, anguish-laden

3 For a more detailed description see Culler (1980), who also deconstructs the opposition of story and discourse.

4 Which was published in French translation one year before the publication of Barthes’s *Introduction*.

5 “The introduction of free motifs is to a substantial extent determined by the literary tradition, and each literary school has a certain characteristic repertoire of free motifs, whereas bound motifs are “rooted”, i.e. they appear in analogous form in all kinds of schools.” (Tomashevsky 1965, 274)

6 Where the defining figure of poetry is the metaphor, while that of the epic is metonymy.

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climate of an action as yet unknown to the reader.
(Barthes 1977c, 96)

It is only with difficulty that we might concede that a causal relationship exists between Bond's frame of mind and the atmospheric phenomenon. In this example it does not concern a natural phenomenon of a bleak situation, but only a certain utilisation of an artificial literary code (natural scenery), which is felt by the reader (perceiver) to be bleak. This confirms the observation that indices are rather defined by contiguity or correlation, rather than by causation. Indices exist in a narrative that has no real-world referent whatsoever, and thus no causal relation between world and text in this sense. In this case the relationship of Bond's temper and the natural scenery is metaphorical, the gloomy atmosphere is indexed through the use of literary cliché and stereotypical environmental details.

The second quote from Barthes's *The Discourse of History* extrapolates two different ways of presenting facts, and in this he defines the index by means of the metaphorical, the lyric and the symbolic.

By generalizing—perhaps abusively—these few remarks on the structure of statements, we can suggest that historical discourse oscillates between two poles, according to the respective density of its indices and its functions. When, in a historian's work, indicial units predominate (constantly referring to an implicit signified), the History is inflected toward a metaphorical form, and borders on the lyric and the symbolic: this is the case, for instance, with Michelet. When on the contrary it is functional units which prevail, the History takes a metonymic form, it is related to the epic: we might cite as a pure example of this tendency the narrative history of Augustin Thierry.
(Barthes 1989a, 136)

One type of discourse inclines towards the metaphorical form (as an example he presents the historian Michelet), and thus also towards the lyrical and symbolic, while in the second type functional units dominate (nuclei and catalysts), in which the main organisational principle is relationships on the basis of continuity (metonymy). As an example of a discourse in which metonymy dominates, Roland Barthes presents the epic and narrative history.

In *The Discourse of History*, one of the main themes is the question of the historicity of presented facts, thus a certain variant of realism. Precisely because historical discourse is not an important symptom of cause (as is the case for the fabula, see e.g. Tomaszewsky 1965, 271), but rather of time or a chance enumeration of events, the organisational principle of presented facts becomes one of the key questions. I quote a last brief passage from *The Discourse of History*, from which it shall be clear that the presentation of "facts", consistently viewed, is not actually a presentation of facts but rather an amassing of signifiers.

These "facts" can thus be conceived as indices that create an entire network, which points to an implicit meaning. Since causality is not important for historical discourse, Barthes also suggests the surprising conclusion that a succession of a number of nuclei forms an index. Thus, we can understand a certain plot sequence as a metaphor which points to its implicit meaning:

For history not to signify, discourse must be limited to a pure unstructured series of notations: these will be chronicles and annals (in the pure sense of the word). In constituted historical discourse, the facts related irresistibly function either as indices or as nuclei whose very succession has an indicial value; and even though facts are presented in an anarchic manner, they at least signify anarchy and refer to a certain negative idea of human history. (Barthes 1989a, 137)

We can therefore see the extent to which the absence of the fabula (narrative) in historical discourse enables us to gain a better understanding of the importance of the metaphorical principle by which Barthes defines the index. What is of fundamental importance is the above-mentioned fact that the plot sequence may be conceived as an index. The theme of Barthes's essay here is historical discourse, and thus it would not be appropriate to reproach him for not projecting this finding into an analysis of the literary work. Why could a certain plot sequence not be understood as an index also in a work of literature?

In Barthes's essay *The Reality Effect* from 1968, the main theme is the question of realism, thus also the significance of certain superfluous "records", which do not have any function either with regard to the plot development or with reference to the created atmosphere. In the introduction, Barthes recapitulates the basic narrative units from the *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative*. With regard to indices, he presents a number of further examples, which nonetheless do not transcend the framework already created above (the piano as an index of social status, strewn cardboard as an index of disorder and destitution, etc.). Let us therefore also examine the last text, in which he conducts an analysis of the Old Testament text of Jacob's struggle with the angel. In this he also touches upon the concept of the index, though now in the relatively traditional assessment as a poetic epithet.

The inventorization and classification of the 'psychological', biographical, characterial and social attributes of the characters involved in the narrative (age, sex, external qualities, social situation or position of importance, etc.). Structurally, this is the area of indices (notations, of infinitely varied expression, serving to transmit a signified – as, for example, 'irritability', 'grace', 'strength' – which the analyst names in his metalanguage; it being understood that the metalinguistic term may very well not figure directly in the

text – as indeed is generally the case – which will not employ ‘irritability’ or ‘grace’ or whatever, if one establishes a homology between narrative and (the linguistic) sentence, then the indice corresponds to the adjective, to the epithet (which, let us not forget, was a figure of rhetoric). This is what we might call indicial analysis. (Barthes 1977e, 127, 128)

Here, I have presented this later definition (from 1972), in which there is an evident retreat from the original, more plausible extrapolation. Indeed, if we regard the index as a poetic epithet and an adjective, we thereby reduce the significance of the index. As a result, it is possible to understand this later definition as a retreat from previously conquered positions. By contrast, in Barthes’s *Introduction* he still refuses to create a homology according to which indices would correspond to adjectives and actions to verbs. “Functions cannot be reduced to actions (verbs), nor indices to qualities (adjectives), for there are actions that are indicial, being ‘signs’ of a character, an atmosphere, etc.” (Barthes 1977c, 93).

Initially, the concept of the index hints at a certain promise for its further use (in the *Introduction* and especially in *The Discourse of History*) for the characteristics of plot sequences (in *The Discourse of History*) and action (in the *Introduction*). However, in the later text (*The Struggle with the Angel*) it is reduced to the characteristics of characters and environment. Nevertheless, the aim of this contribution (as already mentioned) consists in highlighting how, through a consistent reflection of Barthes’s intuitively understood concept of the index, it is possible to construct a more detailed descriptive apparatus by which we can not only capture the atmosphere of the narrative and the psychology of the characters, but also understand the action and change of disposition of the characters with regard to a metaphorical perception of the events and characters within the framework of the narrative. Moreover, the breadth of application of the index may be further extended with reference to *The Photographic Message* (Barthes 1977b) and *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977a), since these texts do not concern verbal sequences.

Now let us return to the actual concept of the index, which in only a few cases (in *The Discourse of History*) is of a metonymic nature, while its dominant delineation in Barthes is metaphorical. As a result, it is necessary to emphasise that Barthes’s intuitively defined concept has nothing in common with Peirce’s triad (icon, index, symbol). To document this I present a lexical device from which it is evident that, despite the identical designation of the index, this concerns entirely different concepts (Greimas, Courtés 1979, 186). We can understand Barthes’s index and Peirce’s index as homonyms.

Roland Barthes is not especially precise in his choice of denomination for the individual narrative units. For designation he rather chooses metaphors, which is the case of both the nucleus and the catalyst. In-

deed, he does not delineate even the index, which in Barthes’s case does not refer to the traditionally understood index of Peirce’s conceptual triad (icons, index, symbol), in strictly conceptual terms. Barthes is aware of this fact, and himself draws attention to it in his delineation of the index since he conceives the index “in the broadest sense of the word.” [...] Similarly, he conceives the choice of other terms also as provisional. (Barthes 1977c, 92)

Barthes’s inconsistency is evident also in the designation of the catalyst, since this does not in any way share in the narrative of events. It can therefore not be conceived analogously to a chemical reaction in which the catalyst enters the chemical process, which it either accelerates or slows down. The inappropriateness of this designation is noticed also by Seymour Chatman, who himself replaces it with the term satellite, which better expresses its subordination to the nucleus (Chatman 1980, 54–55). The term index is not an appropriately chosen designation also due to the simple fact that according to Barthes it is of a metaphorical nature. This is something that an index, not only in Peircean sense, but even when very broadly conceived – with reference to the evoked concept – lacks. The index as a material trace of presence in a certain place (for example in a detective story) acquires its sense from a substantive connection, thus from metonymy.

According to Jonathan Culler (1980), it is not possible to provide an unequivocal answer to the question as to whether the cause of the plot development consists in the events themselves (one event causes another) or in the view of the protagonist, who interprets these events on the basis of certain narrative prompts. In this we may characterise extrapolation from the dynamics of events as external (with its cause in the external world), while causation by narrative prompts may be characterised as internal (with its focal point within the protagonist). In this alternative there is a further hidden question, namely whether the narrative (fabula) is a structure of events or a certain intelligible structure of the mind. Do stories take place in the external world, or does this rather concern a disposition of the human mind to perceive them in this manner? Is a narrative therefore something external (an inherent event), or by contrast internal (determined by the manner of perception)?

We can illustrate this ambiguity in the use of the concept of index within legal discourse. In cases of the miscarriage of justice, an index is inferred to provide a material clue which points to the perpetration of a crime, when in fact this index derives from an untrue or fictional story-narrative. Here, the erstwhile index nevertheless has no basis in reality, but this depends on the definition of the index, the role of causality, and its narrative status as either metaphor or metonym. Further elaboration, however, is best undertaken with reference to some Czech literature and to the Prague School of Linguistics.

2. THE PRAGUE SCHOOL AND APPLICATION TO CZECH LITERATURE

Karel Čapek's masterwork *Hordubal* (1933) illustrates this ambiguity more clearly. The author opens up the code of a detective investigation, proceeding to expose and deconstruct it. The young detective Biegel finds a flashlight and a diamond (for cutting glass) in the house of the murder victim. He succeeds in determining that the diamond served for the preparation of the crime, but with regard to the flashlight, he fails to establish this connection. However, this does not prevent him from understanding the flashlight as a material clue which will lead him to the murderer, since the flashlight is placed within a set of "suspicious" items. In this manner, Biegel constructs a causal connection between the murder and the murderer's intent since the murderer committed the act in the dark and for this reason brought a flashlight with him. The index, thus conceived, not only provides a certain material clue but also refers to the intention of a human being. Within the concept of the index, what is external (the flashlight) becomes something internal (figuring in the murderer's mind). Although Biegel considers the flashlight to be piece of evidence, in the novel Čapek strategically attributes a different meaning to it, since *Hordubal* (the murder victim) had brought it as a gift from America in order to astonish (enthrall) his daughter Hafía. In Barthes's terminology, we would thus speak of the flashlight as an index of a frustrated meeting, as a warning and harbinger of future calamity. When *Hordubal* shows the flashlight to his daughter, it does not work. Let us now return to the definition of the fundamental narrative units.

Of the four units defined by Barthes, only the index markedly evokes the presence of a human subject. Nuclei relate to behaviour (according to the ratio of nuclei and catalysts either accelerated or decelerated), and information serves for anchoring in reality (see Adam 1994, 73). The index betrays the presence of a subject, his or her state of mind, mood, and emotional disposition. Throughout the whole of Barthes's narratological scheme, the index appears to be the last trace of the human subject.

Evidently, this is determined by the formalist endeavour of the structuralist movement to decontextualise the literary work. Barthes removes the work from the contexts of the creative subject (writer, novelist), and thus he later explicitly speaks of the death of the author (Barthes 1977d). Within the literary work we cannot find any emotional trace or lived experience of the author, since within the work, according to Barthes's assertion, it is only language that performs (acts):

For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, "performs", and not "me". (Barthes 1977d, 143).

For the sake of comparison, I present a contrasting concept of the authorial subject by Jan Mukařovský:

A poet is the originator of an utterance with a predominantly aesthetic orientation. (...) The poet's life and works influence one another. The influence of a life upon a work is sometimes apparent (in works of an autobiographical nature), sometimes veiled. The correspondence between a life and a work can also be, however, a merely artistic device without any claim on the documentary validity of the work. (...) The poetic work is always a sign, sometimes direct but more often figurative with respect to the poet's life. (Mukařovský 1977c, 143)

But let us return to Barthes's conception of the authorial subject, which marks the whole of French narratology. Of course, through the erasure of the author, the literary work is also stripped of its other contexts: contingencies of the period, social and historical contexts, etc. Together with the author, the window through which these contexts could have been projected into the work is also destroyed. The emphasis which French narratology places on the autonomy of the literary work is distinguished by a rejection of any kind of representational function of literature, no longer by means of the authorial subject, but through a denial of the reference of the literary work, since the work designates only itself as literary. It refers only to itself, and not to somewhere beyond or outside itself.

As a result, in an interpretation of the literary work within the framework of French narratology, the subject of the testimony (the author) and the object of the message (the depicted events) are overlooked. Perhaps Barthes denotes the second level of action as if any trace of the subject were to be omitted from the analysis, though it is nevertheless clear (even to Barthes) that it relates to literary figures. A protagonist in a novel is a certain counterpart of the authorial subject. Where Barthes reduces the author to the function of writing, he reduces the protagonist in the novel to an actor, whose value is derived from his or her presence in a certain configuration of action. I present this attack (from the position of narratology) on reference and subjectivity in order to emphasise the index as the last trace of the subject (as an anthropomorphic metaphor) in the structuralist contemplation of the literary work.

In Barthes's conception, protagonists are de-psychologised by the reduction of human behaviour (as one of the distinctive activities of human being) to the level of actions, in the most general form to a configuration of six actants. Barthes succeeds in expelling any subjectivity which could be linked with extra- or inter-textual subjects: with the author or the protagonist. However, in his analysis a subjectivity nonetheless persists, which is bound together with the subjectivity of language. Barthes differentiates literary works with a dominant functionality (adventure novels, detective stories etc.) from works with a high density of indices (psychological novels). It is as

if, according to Barthes, we had only one of two options, either to be pulled along by the dynamic of the unfolding events (in works with a predominant plot sequence) or to be captivated by a certain degree of introspection, which leads to the inducing of a certain atmosphere.

In order to emphasise further the counterweight of the nuclei, catalysts and informants on the one hand against the indices on the other, it is sufficient to recall that only indices have implicit semantics. Whereas the first three narrative units defined by Barthes, viewed consistently, are realistic operators, whether this relates to behaviour (nuclei) or a depicted environment (catalysts and informants), the fourth of which draws attention to itself through the opacity of the signifier. We could express this also in other terms: whereas nuclei, catalysts and informants refer to an external, objective world, indices by contrast refer to a world which is essentially bound together with language, and which evokes the presence of a human subject. As a result, we can place in opposition to one another transparent (nuclei, catalysts and information) signifiers, and non-transparent signifiers, namely indices. Only the index, in Barthes's conception, manifests the mediated nature of the signifier.

Here it is appropriate to take inspiration from a structuralist tradition parallel with French narratology. I have in mind the tradition of Czech structuralism (also known by the name of the Prague School), which focused on poetic language as one of the main objects of its academic investigation. The Prague School defined poetic language as non-transparent, as a language which accentuates its own mediated nature and draws attention to itself.

Poetic language belongs among the numerous other functional languages, each of which is an adaptation of a linguistic system to a certain goal of expression. Aesthetic effect is the goal of poetic expression. However, the aesthetic function, which thus dominates in poetic language (being only a concomitant phenomenon in other functional languages), concentrates attention on the linguistic sign itself, hence it is exactly the opposite of a practical orientation toward a goal which in language is communication. (Mukařovský 1977b, 4)

What applies to poetic language also applies to poetic designation, which is furthermore closely linked with the subject of its originator.

Poetic designation differs from communicative designation by virtue of the fact that its relation to reality is weakened on behalf of its semantic incorporation into the contexture. In poetry the practical functions of language—the presentational, the expressive, and the appellative—are subordinated to the aesthetic function which renders the sign itself the center of attention. It is precisely the prevalence of this function that makes the contexture in poetry so important for designation.

[...]

The weakening of the immediate relation of poetic designation to reality is counterbalanced by the fact that a poetic work as a global designation enters into relation with the total set of the existential experiences of the subject, be he the creative or the perceiving subject. (Mukařovský 1977a, 72, 73)

It is only if we begin to view literary works in the same way as we regard poetic language that we can become aware of another semantics than that which is exhausted by an analysis of plot sequences. It is evident that Barthes also took into consideration the artistic quality of language, but during his structuralist period this never occupied a significant or important position. While Mukařovský deduces the composition of a prose work from the composition of poetic language (Mukařovský 1982), Barthes understands composition strategies within the perspective of traditional rhetorical figures (see also e.g., Todorov 1966, 128).

I shall leave aside the question regarding why the Prague School did not make a more pronounced impact on the terminology of narratology and the influence of the structuralist movement of the 1960s in France. This is answered in a certain manner by the editors of a recently published edition of studies by Mukařovský in France (Mukařovský 2018). It is evident from the fact that they are required to write an extensive introductory study (Kubiček, Bílek 2018) within the intellectual contexts of the Prague school as long as half a century after the main heyday of French structuralism, that until this point it had not been systematically investigated.

In the second half of the 1960s only a few fragmentary essays by Mukařovský were published in France, as well as one interview (Pier 2018, V–VI). Furthermore, in the aforementioned edition it is especially Mukařovský's theoretical essays that are translated, an exception being his analysis of Nezval's *Absolute Gravedigger* (1937) and a study devoted to Čapek's translations of French poetry. To enable an understanding of the lyrical elements in prose texts it would be fitting to read an analysis of the prose work via the prism of devices of poetic language, as Mukařovský does for example in his study on the prose works of Čapek (Mukařovský 1964). Without doubt, one of the outstanding heirs of the Prague School is Milan Kundera, who devoted his habilitation thesis to lyrical traces in the prose work of Vladislav Vančura. One of the main themes of this early work by Kundera is the search for devices of poetic language which compensate for the flaccidity of the plot component.

The fact that the analysis of language, poetic and stylistic devices is of absolutely fundamental importance for the Prague School also ensues from the context of the then relatively young Czech literature, in which poetic works predominated. Kundera lamented this fact in his essays from the early 1960s (Kundera 1962a). Furthermore, a number of Czech prose writers began their literary careers by writing poetry.

This does not apply in the case of Vladislav Vančura, a foremost representative of the Czech inter-war

avant-garde, though his consistent regard to the evocative power of poetic language is evident from the very beginning of his first novel *The Baker Jan Marhoul* (1929). Moreover, in numerous discussions of the time (1920s and 30s), Vančura criticises the prioritising of the fabula over the evocable devices of poetic speech. In one of these polemics he emphasises his stance by inverting the relationship between the fabula and poetic devices, with the assertion that the fabula is merely a more extensive poetic image. Here I present two quotations from his essays "On the Social Function of Art" and "Comment on the Dispute Concerning Poetic Language", from which there ensue further fundamental factors for the examination of the theme of indices as conceived by Roland Barthes:

The plot does not have any more serious function than any poetic image, and in fact is essentially nothing other than an amplified poetic image (Nezval). (Vančura 1972a, 90)

and

In contrast with criticism which places such emphasis on the mediation of messages, it is possible to assert that non-verbal contents are of little significance and that the fabula does not have any more important function than a verbal figure. (Vančura 1972b, 94)

In the first quotation from Vančura there is a clear reference to Nezval's concept of the poetic image, which he formulated in his essay "Dual Imagination" (Nezval 1984). In this essay Nezval differentiates comparison from poetic image. In comparison a shift of meaning takes place on the basis of an external similarity; comparison adds to the economy of expression, while at the same time it is possible to clearly separate the notion being compared from the object of its comparison. This is entirely the opposite in the case of a poetic image, which (similarly to Barthes' index) has an implicit meaning.

Nezval selects examples from Mácha's poem *May* (Nezval 1984, 9–10), citing a sequence of poetic images, which are intended to point to the same fact (the experience of lost childhood). We cannot arrive at its evocation directly (it cannot be defined), but only circuitously, mediated by a poetic image. A certain anthropomorphic metaphor has its home only in poetic language. The poetic image is the source of the poetic imagination. "(Mácha – author's note) compares the extinguishing of his childhood age firstly to a faded shadow, secondly to an image of white cities submerged in water, and thirdly to the last thoughts of the dying" (Nezval 1984, 9).

In both of Vančura's formulations quoted above, there is a perceptible effort not to deny the importance of the poetic image (which, as I have outlined, we may understand as an equivalent to Barthes' index) for the

semantics of the literary work. Vančura's polemic consists in the fact that he first of all places on par the poetic image and the plot component, in order to then polemically enhance the relationship between the plot and non-plot elements (which also include devices of poetic language).

Vančura's formulations are brief, appearing only twice, thus it may even appear as if the author himself hesitated with regard to the conclusion he had arrived at (to subordinate plot elements to poetic figures). In Vančura we may observe a certain transition from a defensive stance (the plot has no more serious function than any poetic image), from a certain neutralisation of the supremacy of the fabula, to a more attacking stance. It is now sufficient if we elaborate upon Vančura's discovery and then project it into Barthes's terminology. In this way we shall be able to see what far-reaching consequences ensue from it.

3. SYNTHESIS: NARRATIVE AND POETIC LANGUAGE

If we succeed in forming a delayed intersection of Czech structuralism with French narratology⁷, we may then start to build a theoretical perspective which could lead us to a new understanding of the literary work. In such a manner we could not only enhance the conceptual framework of classical narratology with new terms, but above all turn attention towards overlooked aspects of the literary work, to the devices of poetic language.

First of all, it is necessary to re-evaluate the importance which Barthes attributes to indices (in *The Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative*). He conceives them merely as units with a weakened functionality, which he furthermore understands as elaborative articles (nuclei, plot elements). In Barthes's conception, indices represent a certain residue of his mythological investigation. In the conception of indices, there is a present understanding of the symbolic nature of the icon as a sign which is a signifier of something else. Here Barthes classifies the symbolic (in *The Discourse of History*) as one of two organisational fields, a metaphorical form which is typical of poetry.

In the ordering of descriptive levels (function, action, narration), Barthes determines the hierarchy of their importance. The chief content is thus played out on the level of functions, into which the plot outline is written. Indices as integrating elements therefore merely create an atmosphere, the characters of the protagonists, and distinguish the fundamental emotional tone.

This hierarchy is manifestly an inheritance of models adopted from Russian formalism, above all from Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). The folktales analysed by Propp, with their magical elements, are therefore inscribed into an elaborated methodical and interpretative framework. Since Propp analyses literary works which are distinguished by a predominant plot

⁷ Vančura attended lectures of the Prague Linguistic Circle, and was friendly with several of its members, as the most distinguished of whom we could name Roman Jakobson.

sequence, he allows himself to lose sight of the motivation of the characters and other literary devices that would evoke the inner world of the protagonists. Since the motivation of the characters in the folktales with magical elements is not of essential significance, Propp pays no heed to it. Propp's central concept of function is emphatically inscribed into the structuralist conception of literature in France, in which function shall be one of its chief themes. The characters and their inner motivations disappear in favour of analyses of plot sequences.

Since Barthes's analysis of plot sequences neglects the motivation of the characters (the current state of their knowledge), he is unable to understand the connection between the variable of the doxic world of the protagonist (what the protagonist thinks about his or her situation) and the change in the protagonist's behaviour. For Barthes the units of fundamental importance remain the nuclei, from which all else unfolds.

Viewed consistently, Barthes does not reconstruct the meaning of the literary work (he therefore does not do what he attempted in *Mythologies* (1957), in which the question of meaning was of primary importance, but rather the plot sequence and the value of other narrative units. In doing so, he abdicates from the task of uncovering the meaning of the literary work in question, since he exhaustively delineates its fundamental narrative components: nuclei, catalysts, indices, and informants, to which he later adds realistic elements. An analysis conducted in such a manner creates the impression of a mechanistic description, in which he enables the determination only of the plot (as a sequence of nuclei), which is to be filled with residual activities or descriptions (catalysts), anchored in reality (information) and toned by a certain atmosphere (indices).

In this static schema, it is impossible to consider that the elaborative elements (here we are interested primarily in indices) could contribute to the development of the fabula. For this, however, it would be necessary to consider the motivations of the protagonists (their reasoning, observations etc.). If the characters begin to grasp certain events differently, they not only transform their relationship to these events, but the mood and atmosphere of a certain plot sequence is also altered. In Barthes's conception, it is not possible to shift this rigid framework of events (with its sequence of plot elements). I quote Kundera from the early 1960s.

A novel may have lyrically strong details, but it must not be lyrically composed. On the other hand, if lyrical qualities are developed in a novel on a firm epic foundation, this can only have a positive significance. This was demonstrated by Vančura in his best novels. (Kundera 1962)

It is not necessary to agree entirely with this formulation. We may indeed recall the analysis of Mukařovský, who in his prose works takes note of compositional devices adopted from lyrical poetry (Mukařovský 1984). What is fundamental, however, is that Milan Kundera

emphasises the positive influence of lyrical details. In the later novels of Milan Kundera, this shall apply even more emphatically, since metaphors as lyrical devices *par excellence* contribute to the development of events. Let us recall *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which Tomas falls in love with Tereza on the basis of a single metaphor. Moreover, in Kundera's work certain plot sequences are of the nature of a signifier. For example, through the means of the life story of Tereza's mother, the narrator illustrates not only the bitter fate of Tereza herself, but makes this an index of deluded hopes and thwarted destiny. Now the entire structure that would ensue from an analysis of the plot sequence gradually begins to fall apart.

In the story of Tereza's mother, there is no updating of the plot tension whatsoever. The semantics of certain plot sequences need not be based on plot tension. We gradually arrive at a position in which we may regard the fabula as a certain signifier. This would also apply to Tereza's mother – the poetic image of her fate, constructed from a few metaphors and life details. Mentions of the signifying conception of the protagonists, who will in this way be liberated from their subordination to the plot sequence, can also be found in the lecture cycle of Mukařovský (1929/1930) entitled *Poetic Semantics*:

So for example, the protagonists of an epic work are in fact essentially metaphors; just as with a linguistic metaphor we potentially feel the "actual meaning" (without this potential actual meaning there is no metaphor), we feel the protagonists of a poetic work to be "representatives" of someone else (the poet, the reader); this feeling may be very indefinite, at other times – by the nature of the work – highly emphasised; this depends on the school of poetry. It may also occur that we feel the protagonist by metonymy or synecdoche as a typical representative of a period, a social class etc. (Mukařovský 1995, 21-22)

As soon as we begin to view a prose work as a certain form of poetic language, we can easily extricate it from its content aspect (the narrative and its environment), since its signification will be emphasised. If we understand a narrative as a signifier, we may also answer the question concerning the nature of this signifier. If Vančura speaks of the fabula as a more extensive poetic image, he steers our attention from the plot aspect of the narrative to its static aspect, to the inducing of a certain atmosphere, the evocation of a certain experience. The conceiving of the signification of a literary work, in which we reject a binding division into plot and descriptive elements, enables us to arrive at a more coherent description of its semantics. The fabula shall thus be conceived as one of the structures of narration (and not as the only structure, as is the case for Roland Barthes). However, we evidently cannot overlook the temporal character of the literary work.

But how are we to respond to the assertion that the fabula (as a temporally and causally organised sequence

of events) is a more extensive poetic image, thus something which has a systematic and non-temporal character? The non-temporality of a poetic image is present already in the choice of designation: it concerns an image which is distinguished by the systematic nature of its composition, an asynchronicity of lines. We may therefore contemplate a literary work as a constructed image of human destiny. We have this "image" before ourselves up to the end of the literary work. We are guided to look upon this image by plot-based and emotional stimuli. Indeed, we may conceive of both (the arrangement of the narrative dynamics and the maintenance of our attention by means of emotional stimulus) as an auxiliary structure which keeps us engaged, so that at the end of the work we can look upon the "image" of destiny.

Barthes uses the designation "hermeneutic code" in the novel *S/Z* (Barthes 1970, 26), as a partial revelation of a mystery and a deferral of its resolution, and one of two fundamental impulses for reading. The second impulse relates to the emotional aspect of the theme, the sense of which is to maintain contact with the reader of the work. The hermeneutic code, thus also a certain plot construction, is directed towards its denouement: to the solution of a mystery, to the establishment of a balanced state of affairs, etc. This instance is usually located at the end of the story, otherwise it would lose its sense, at least in the case that its sense is to stimulate the reader's curiosity and maintain the reader's interest to the end of the work.

However, we may also present examples of literary works which do not abide by this principle and reveal the denouement before the end of the narration. A textbook example could indeed be Vančura's aforementioned *The Baker Jan Marhoul*, in which the demise of the main protagonist is described immediately on the first page. Milan Kundera also has a tendency in his novels to reveal the death of his protagonists before the reader reaches the end of the novel, e.g. in the novel *Life is Elsewhere* (1973) and in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984).

In these and analogous cases, the authors to a certain extent profane the fabula as the traditionally conceived fundamental structure of the work, since through their novels they demonstrate that they can suffice without the narrative options that the fabula offers them. Emotional stimulus is one of the ways in which it is possible to compensate for the absence of plot tension, which in Vančura's novel is provided by the high density of poetic images. If plot tension is lacking in a prose work, it may be replaced by devices of poetic language, illustrated in Kundera's monograph on the novels of Vančura (Kundera 1961).

CONCLUSION

The reader situates himself or herself within a certain perspective of sense. We are stimulated to read by the plot construction, to read the literary work in its entirety. In this process we are incidentally affected in some way by the many devices of poetic language. The sense of the literary work is therefore not completely subordinate

to the fabula. If it were, a whole range of literary phenomena would fall through this excessively thin strainer. Rather, the sense is implicitly pointed to by the manifold employed devices of poetic language. In Barthes's terminology, the index is a trace of poetic speech. As a result, we may also understand it as a disavowed trace of poetic language in narratology. If we focus our attention on it as a component, which in a dominant manner contributes to the semantics of a literary work, we liberate the literary work from the rigid schemas of the plot sequences. It is only then that we may map in detail the implicit semantics of the literary work, the dispersed signifiers that point to the sense of the composition.

The temporality of a literary work (the auxiliary plot structure) should induce an impression of the timeless – a certain form of poetic image in various degrees of complexity and intricacy. We now proceed to a further understanding of Vančura's proposition: a certain form of plot, consistently viewed, is a certain type of anthropomorphic metaphor. Within the work of Barthes, the index remains the trace of the author-subject, and in this way it marks the absence of agency in the presumptive formality of French narratology, which is better accounted for by the parallel investigations of the Prague School. In this way, a proper understanding of the index could provide the bridge concept between the respective approaches to structuralism. For both traditions, the literary work unfolds before us in its diversity and complexity, which is essentially bound with poetic speech. Thus conceived, the signification of the literary work enables the creation of the most subtle descriptive apparatus, which will serve effectively for its consistent interpretation.

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