

Subject as World, World as Subject

(Miroslav Červenka: *Fikční světy lyriky*/The Fictive Worlds of The Lyric)

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The following reflections on some of the basic assumptions and crucial methodological choices in Miroslav Červenka's monograph *Fikční světy lyriky* (The Fictive Worlds of The Lyric, 2005) will not go into details of many of its specific solutions, even though some of these are highly original, for example the concept of "zones", presuppositions and inferences required to solve questions of incompleteness of a fictional world and its completion by the reader.

The work of a disciple of Prague structuralism is developed here and linked with the theory of possible worlds. While in the work of Lubomír Doležel the transition from structuralism to the theory of possible worlds represents a turning point, a transition from the language of a work of art (stylistic analyses from *O style moderní české prózy*/On Style in Modern Czech Prose) to the level of the presented (fictional) world, Červenka by contrast *links* both theories in a way that correlates the Prague structuralist subject with the fictional world. This is achieved by connecting the fictional world in lyric poetry (originating in the theory of possible worlds) with the subjects of the lyric poetry (these methodological constructs have their roots in the Prague School as well as in Červenka's earlier work *Styl a význam*/Style and Meaning): "the fictional world of a lyric poem is represented by its subjects" (Červenka, 2005, p. 728; henceforth I give only the page number when citing this work). Any empirical author is kept out of the game – and Červenka productively points to the semiotic character of the constitution of the author in texts, e.g. paratexts on his/her biography, and so forth. The most important subject remains the subject of a work of art. Furthermore, there is also a semiotically constituted construct of "personality", originating in Mukařovský, that combines several subjects of various works by the same author (p. 755), followed by the lyrical subject in terms of the role it plays in the text (analogous to the I-narrator in narrative fiction).

The first step that a theoretician of literature must take in this case is a decision that is of great significance for the further development of his theory, i.e. his theory will have to develop in a particular direction, which will rule out other directions: he has to decide how to answer to the question whether lyric poetry should be labelled as fiction or not. Červenka questions the literary scientific truism that identifies fiction with narrative. At this point the issue is not whether the lyrical text is "truthful" but whether the lyrical text, like the text of a novel, for example, also constitutes an extensional fictional world, independent of the medium of its manifestation, through its intentional function (i.e. text facture). Červenka's answer to this question is in the affirmative. This answer, as he himself realises, is by no means axiomatic. In my opinion, by this affirmative answer, Červenka's work cannot model a literary form – lyric poetry – as a whole but only a certain type of lyric poetry, the "subject" lyric, we might say. The identification of the fictional world of lyric poetry with its subjects is but a second step.

Moving on to the first decision: according to Červenka, lyric poetry (as a literary form) constitutes a fictional world, i.e. each lyrical text constitutes a fictional world. However, by this gesture, he excludes from this category – i.e. the literary form of lyric poetry – a relatively significant proportion of text output that was analysed, for example, by Hugo Friedrich in his *The Structure of Modern Poetry*. Let us first ask a preliminary question: what does it mean to say – for example in the purview of Prague structuralism – that the text constitutes a represented, or fictional, world? It means that units of meaning, sememes, are transcribed into a higher level of text structure, to the thematic level, where they become motifs that are not wholly dependent on their linguistic implementation (Mukařovský); for example, the motif of the moon can be expressed by various phrases (pale knight of the night, light of the underworld, and so forth). It is the *motif* that belongs to the level of the construction of the fictional world. At one point, Červenka offers an example of the decoding of a metaphorical meaning (pp. 764 – 765): it is not the metaphorical units of meaning or their connection that are a part of the fictional world but the decoded verbatim utterance.

One might object that the fictional world of most lyrical poems may well include ancestral soil, the sunset (though not the combination of sememes “chariot of fire” as a comparatum in the structure of a simile), a lyrical subject and, to some extent, also a phantom-like person, perhaps a parent or more universally an ancestor; it will, however, not include horrific “dragon’s teeth” sprouting directly from the earth since these are a part of a figurative semantic plan, and not of the motif (thematic) structure. It is questionable whether in modern lyric poetry this verbatim meaning, of which the fictional world is constructed, can *always* be decoded from the semantic activity of a text facture. For example, this is the case whenever there is a play of the imagination, a semantic play of the confrontation of linguistic meanings: in relation to Rimbaud, Friedrich talks about “sensual irreality of words” where it is a matter of “aggregations of words” whose individual parts possess a sensual quality. Nevertheless, such aggregations connect things in such an abnormal way that an unreal construct emerges from sensual qualities. However, they appear in a form that could never be detected by the human eye (Friedrich 2005, p. 79). Because of this, at least this type of poem cannot, in principle, constitute a fictional world: “A poem does not take place in things but in language” (Friedrich 2005, p. 99). Similarly Todorov, in order to exclude the genre of fantasy and magic from the realm of the lyric – something that is a fundamental issue for the constitution of these genres – rejects a “representative” model of language in poetry: “a poetic image is a combination of words, not things” (Todorov 1995, p. 60), which means that this combination of words does not rise to the thematic level and does not constitute a fictional world. As the Russian formalists said, poetic images are intransitive (ibid).

However, there is still the possibility that this semantic play, or de-semantisation (the hermeticity of modern poetry), remains within the field of activity of the Červenkian subject of a work of art. I shall attempt to challenge this below. I will, therefore, postulate the following preliminary hypothesis, which I shall test further on subjects of lyric poetry constituted by this monograph: Červenka’s study construes a model of one type of lyric poetry, namely “subject” lyric poetry (generated by a hypothetical subject of a work of

art) and the subjective lyric (constituting a lyrical subject, albeit, sometimes, in a “concealed” form).

Červenka’s conception of the subject of a work of art is based on how this was constituted in Prague structuralism by Mukařovský (who, however, radically overcame such a subject through transformations of his concept of a “semantic gesture”) and is, in some respects, also a continuation of earlier theories of the lyric. The latter are connected with the concept of the subject probably because of a relatively late conceptualisation of lyric poetry as a result of which “poetry expressing mood and experience, which was dominant in Goethe’s time and in romanticism, and the understanding of the lyric derived from it, became the norm” (Nünning ed. 2006, p. 791): Hegel holds that it is in lyric poetry that “the interiority of the subject, ‘the content and activity of the inner spirit’” is expressed most intensely (ibid., p. 791). Thus, according to Červenka, the fictional world of a lyrical work of art is the “content of the consciousness” of a lyrical subject, and while reading a lyrical poem we are “witnesses to an ongoing transformation, a change of the momentarily experienced world into a mental image”. (p. 774). Thus Červenka’s concept, defining as it does lyric poetry at that most universal level, approaches – to use Jiří Trávníček’s distinction – the essentialist-ontological orientation (cf. the entry on “the theory of lyric poetry” in Nünning, ed. 2006, p. 792). Let us recall that “consciousness”, “mental image”, “perceptions” into which, according to Červenka, the lyrical subject transforms all fictional entities (the basis here is a metaphysical thesis *esse est percipi*), are historically constituted terms that carry in themselves a certain philosophical heritage: the heritage of metaphysics of the subject to which Červenka’s work is considerably indebted.

What makes the indebtedness of this monograph to this major tradition apparent is the fact that it feels no need to propose a definition of the subject as such (disputes on reflexivity of a subject or the direct, pre-reflective experiencing of self, as stated by e.g. Manfred Frank, etc.), because the term “subject” is fully carried by the tradition, and is instantly comprehensible: indeed, it becomes a *definiens* that defines other, more derived terms, e.g. “a fictional work world of lyric poetry”.

The traditionally defined lyrical subject is not really at issue and can be accepted as an operational term. The “rhetoric of subjectivity” can be studied by the techniques of literary theory, and where some (fictional) Self is presented in a lyrical text with its own wavelength, feelings, emotions, and perceptions, the text undoubtedly creates its own lyrical subject by means of linguistic operations. However, the metaphysics of the modern, autonomous, or near-autonomous, subject is fully expressed in Červenka’s concept of the *subject of a work of art*. The construct of the subject is the originator “from which the work arises and to which, as its originator (metonymically, demonstrably), it points, is ultimately inherent in any human creation” (p. 748), i.e., it is inherent in a house or a car, for example. This raises the question: why must this originator be considered a subject of *all things* (and sometimes rather as disembodied consciousness), rather than, for example, as a human, a “self”, a human being, Heidegger’s *Dasein*, or a woman (in feminism), and so on. Why exactly is this construct of a discourse – the subject – privileged above other cultural constructs? The monograph itself is not entirely clear about this: at one point it

uses the phrase “soul of a lyrical subject” (p. 764), presumably in the sense of a modernist soul à la F. X. Šalda. Furthermore, this idea of a single originator-subject obviously originates in the “literature-centredness” of Prague structuralism (and the belief that literature is an exemplary form of art from which the originator is deduced): in other forms of art, such as film, a hypothetical subject, inferred from the work of art, is not such an obvious choice because here the “creator” is collective and it is not entirely clear who can claim which contribution as their own creation. For example, cinema theory uses the impersonal term “film source”.

The second problematic question is historic, and due to the scope of Červenka’s monograph, only hypothetical: could this historically constituted category of the subject be anachronistically applied to, for instance, texts historically preceding a modern concept of subject. Would not – for example – the scholastic “soul” (mind, intellect, memory) be sometimes historically a more correct interpretational term for the analysis of medieval literature?

I shall now focus on one type of subject, the subject of a work of art. In Červenka’s discourse, the subject of a work of art is hypothetically deduced from a text: it is what creates and organises the structure of a work of verbal art. The work of art is a clue that points to its creator, who derives solely from the work of art (Červenka affirms and does not disguise this inevitable circularity). However, there is some pressure of empiricism behind this hypothetical construct, namely that there is invariably a “someone” who creates a work of art and this someone is (and this is already a philosophical prejudice) precisely the *subject*. This is empirically falsified by collective works (collective identities such as Generation X, Luther Blissett, Boileau-Narcejac, Monaldi-Sorti, Deleuze-Guattari). A supporter of the notion “the subject of a work of art” could perhaps derive this from collective works also, but only if it was accepted a priori as an indispensable concept. The subject of a work of art also involves a certain deliberateness in constructing the work (Mukařovský’s solution to the problem of deliberateness and non-deliberateness in art might prove to be ground-breaking in this context). However, must it inevitably be thought of as a subject? For example, Umberto Eco, even when he uses the term “subject”, interprets it as a model author that is mostly a textual strategy derived from a text. It is also possible to speak of an organisational principle (or principles) without reference to a hypothetical originator: that this is simply how the text is organised.

According to Červenka, the subject of a work of art organises the work (p. 749): it is the hypothetical bearer of all creative activities (p. 750), it is “a personified link, an admixture and hierarchy of various updated semiotic systems in a perceiver’s mind (...) It is [for a perceiver] an agent that decided that these are the [systems] that will be selected and used in the semantic structuring of the work“ (p. 751).

That is exactly the sore point: why is it necessary to personify this link, this intersection of systems, turning it into a subject and not think of it precisely as the intersection of codes, as a mechanism of their radical transformation? It is in this area of Červenka’s discourse that the fundamental role of the metaphysics of subject becomes apparent: it is a highly autonomous subject, the one that selects from language and semiotic systems. In certain sections of Červenka’s monograph it seems as if the subject

of a work of art were located *outside* of the code from which he selects (it finds itself almost in the position of a transcendental „self“): it is explicitly called a “user of semiotic systems” (p. 754). However, my hermeneutic objection is that the one who selects from the semiotic systems and organises them must first and primarily *understand* these linguistic units (the possibilities from which it selects), for example, s/he must understand lexical meanings of words) And he/she understands these on the basis of his/her linguistic and semiotic systems (so it is, as it were, a deleted “subject” that is an intersection of these systems). He/she must choose the elements of a work of art and organise them on the basis of his/her linguistic (literary, semiotic etc.) system. That means that he/she is not a user of a system standing outside of him/herself but rather s/he *is* actually the system itself, or the one through whom the system operates, or perhaps put more clearly: he/she simply *is* this operation of the system. In a structuralist discourse it is thus possible in this case to cut out a construct of the subject with Occam’s razor as a “redundant being”, to exclude it, and then it is necessary to propose the thesis that the semiotic system selects from other semiotic systems, *ergo* the system transforms itself. In this way it creates, *generates* a work of art.

Again: if Červenka sets the subject of a work of art against a literary tradition, i.e. the system of literature, presenting it as a “function of literary creation” (p. 758), then in the context of a structuralist discourse it is possible to think of it as a function of transforming a system. Červenka’s solution seems to me to be a kind of aporetic attempt to merge semiotic structuralism with a modern autonomous subject, whereby the first rules out the second in terms of its radical consequences.

If this subject of a work of art in Červenka’s discourse freely (s)elects, for example, language forms, its attitude to tradition and so on, this means that it is intended to function as a modern autonomous subject, that there is nothing here that could establish or control, its choices. It further means that this subject – being the “housekeeper of a poem” ([Kazimierz Wyka], p. 753), i.e. a ruler in its own house – cannot serve as a channel for the utterance by something it is manipulated by as, for example, a torrent of *jouissance* into a speech in Kristeva: “*Jouissance* thus soaks in through a socially symbolic order by making cracks in it, by disrupting it, by changing vocabulary and syntax, the word itself, by releasing an instinct lying below them” (Kristeva 2004, p. 73). This kind of subject of a work of art rules absolutely over (for example) its unconsciousness, over basic instincts, over linguistic and literary structures. It is the “originator of the rules of discourse” ([Ślawiński], p. 753), so it is not, as in structuralism, a subject that would by contrast originate in the rules of discourse or be the result of their production (for Červenka, only the lyrical subject is like this).

This alternative hypothesis of codes – as outlined above – may sound like a structuralist construct that is distant from empiricism but Červenka’s subject of a work of art, because it does not have its own voice or body, is also a beautiful phantom, existing in a realm of hypotheses (Červenka himself aptly situates it in a “domain of mirages”, p. 750) and, for me, it errs not by detaching itself totally from empiricism but rather by

not doing so adequately, by remaining in a halfway house. The argument that each human creation has its originator sounds rather “rudimentary”, “commonsensical” while the subject of a work of art (without a voice and body, not having qualities of a sentient human being, p. 749), which is being proven in this commonsensical way, is a rather hypothetical and “non-commonsensical” construct going radically against “common sense” tendencies of identifying an empiric author directly with a lyrical subject.

A very simple example may explain the legitimacy of a structuralist abstraction mentioned above: when a structural linguist, modelling the diachronic transformation of a language, models a change of vocalic, grammatical and semantic systems, such as the change of one phoneme to another that results in the reorganisation of the whole system, s/he abstracts away from the fact that this change (e.g. from /g/ to /h/, or contraction) must have happened in real utterances of real people perhaps a million times at a certain stage of development, that there might have been transitional articulations, etc. From these specific speech utterances the linguist abstracts and models the transformation of one system into another. And it does not even cross the linguist’s mind to claim that this abstraction implies that the system transformed itself without the participation of real people with the power of speech.

Elsewhere in the monograph Červenka explicitly refers to the subject of a work of art as a “semiotic construct” (p. 749). In this sense it is the same semiotic construct as, for example, another, previously-mentioned hypothesis of a code that transforms another code. Yet elsewhere in the text he identifies the subject of a work of art, in the course of actual perception, with the semantic activity of a stanza (p. 768-9) – but in that case, why not maintain the semantic play of a text without subsequently deducing this metaphysical basis from it?

In another part of his monograph, the subject of a work of art apparently has a different meaning where the “very domain and core of the subject of a work of art is the creation of a work of art and the mental processes related to it” (p. 753). Here we find ourselves almost in the field of cognition and the genetic critique – derived from the work of art – of the way the work of art might have been created. However, this is significantly different from the question of how the work of art is organised.

Another “assumed” hermeneutic question is: what is the *background* of that subject, *on what basis* does the subject of a work of art make the choice of forms (p. 776) to be used the work of art. From the point of view of Červenka’s structuralist concept, too, this happens apparently on the basis of semiotic codes. And this raises another hermeneutical question: are these choices free, do some codes internalised in the “subject” not exert some pressure (such as the pressure of literary tradition, cultural codes or patterns)? From this perspective, Culler’s “dissolution of the subject” in a text which Červenka repudiates cannot be dismissed so easily.

A final remark: from the subject-centric concept of lyric it also follows that Červenka cannot imagine a lyrical poem without a lyrical subject: as far as he is concerned, impersonality is a consequence of the role accepted by the lyrical subject (p. 756). However, what if, contrariwise, the lyrical subject is the accepted role of the language?

After all, in some poems, the “subject” that chooses forms is the accident (*hasard*) that can never be abolished by a throw of dice. Some texts may be haecceities, becomings, stream currents. Semantic expressions are juxtaposed and they do not always have to reference someone who organised them: they might have been organised by several (agents), they could have been the result of picking words out of a hat, a generator of random numbers applied to word sequences, instincts hacking the language system – instincts over which the subject does not have power. Texts may give rise to the “being” of language, and they do not have to be interpreted only as indices of a “mental world” of a lyrical subject pointing to the creative subject of a work of art. Maybe some poems fall like rain. They may rain.

I will conclude by reiterating that Miroslav Červenka’s monograph is an excellent study of a certain type of lyric poetry based on certain philosophical-methodological assumptions.

Translated by Tomáš Mrva

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