ON "JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE POEM"*

(The genesis of the polemical value of imaginative expression in the work of Vratislav Effenberger)

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In his theoretical essay "Journey to the Center of the Poem," Vratislav Effenberger engages with the semantic character and dynamic of the artistic work whose nature we could designate as irreal, irrational, or absurd.[1] The text contains, in a nascent stage, many of the concepts that Effenberger was to develop into a more conceptually concrete and systematic form in his later theoretical works. In a relatively clear-cut manner, Effenberger outlines in the essay a perspective on the basis of which the author will later

* Translated from the Czech original by Greg Evans.

[1] To be consistent with the terminology of Karel Teige, we shall also utilize the term "poetry" (*poesie*) for the imaginative artistic production. The identification of all types of imaginative (and not just literary) expression with poetry is not something we consider to be an avant-garde provocation but rather the result of an insight into the underlying principles of the work. For that matter, in the text we generally approach visual and literary creative expression on an abstract level. For our purposes, the specifics of varying modes of expression are not important.

analyze psychological and psychosocial problematics, above all with regard to human imaginative activity (dreams, inspiration, artistic creation, and so on) and its functions.

Effenberger's peculiar style – in which the line of reasoning isn't always clear and the very construction of the sentence is sometimes in conflict with the logical sequence of the argument, which nontheless features forceful metaphors and imaginative observations – may succeed in opening up the reader's consciousness to various creative associations and feelings, but nevertheless strongly complicates the reader's ability to orient him or herself in the text.[2] The essay nevertheless progresses rather unambiguously from (1) the standard interpretation of poetic expression and its dynamic, towards (2) the delineation of a theoretical model of poetic inspiration, followed by (3) a description of the transformations of poetic expression during Effenberger's own time leading up to (4) an attempt to grasp the semantics of absurdity and its relationship to reality and, finally, (5) to an outline of the semiotic structure of imaginative poetry (*poesie*). Throughout, Effenberger repeatedly emphasizes the meaning of the conscious, reflexive components of the poetic creative and interpretive process, as well as the (polemical) relationship of the artistic work to reality. According to Effenberger, it is by way of these coordinates that the "Journey to the Center of the Poem" proceeds.

The author composed the article in June of 1966. Its contents, however, are made up of material that he had already written in 1961. Effenberger formulated "Journey to the Center of the Poem" as his contribution to an international anthology that was being put together on the occasion of the seventieth birthday of Roman Jakobson. For the purposes of the article he made use of an older, extensive work (more than a hundred pages long), titled *Pohyby symbolů* (*The Movements of Symbols*),[3] selecting some passages from it that he slightly revised in a few places and then assembled into a new text. He did not write any additional material for the article. In a letter dated January 15, 1966, addressed to Peter de Ridder, who had approached Effenberger in the matter, he explains the meaning of the work and the reason he had just chosen it for the anthology:

[2] One factor in this was no doubt the fact that Effenberger became accustomed to writing most of his texts for the so-called "drawer" (i.e., due to potential censorship, they were not likely to be published in the proper sense of the word), so that the reader was usually only a secondary consideration.

[3] This work remains unpublished to the present day; it has been however extensively cited and commented upon by František Dryje in his afterword to the second volume of Effenberger's *Básně* (*Poems*): František Dryje, "Útěk do reality" [Escape into reality], in Vratislav Effenberger, *Básně 2* (Prague: Torst, 2007), pp. 827–878. Tomáš Glanc has also addressed *Pohyby symbolů* in his article "Gramatický versus imaginativní dynamismus (Effenbergerova transgrese strukturalismu)" [Grammatical versus imaginative dynamism (Effenberger's structuralist transgressions)], in Ivan Landa and Jan Mervart (eds.), *Imaginace a forma: Mezi estetickým formalismem a filosofií emancipace: Studie Josefu Zumrovi* (Prague: Filosofia, 2018), pp. 119–130.

> It seems to me, that from the work on which I am now concentrating, it would be most appropriate to select a theoretical article on internal and external symbols in poetry, painting, and life, for this most closely approaches Professor Jakobson's interests, and scholarly work.

In additional correspondence that touches on the publication of "Journey to the Center of the Poem," we also find references to the possibility of the future publication of an English translation of Effenberger's book – then in the process of preparation for publication – *Realita a poesie* (*Reality and Poetry*). This never came about, but the English version of "Journey to the Center of the Poem" was published in the aforementioned anthology.[4] We do not know with certainty who attended to its translation, but according to the information available to us it would appear that Effenberger himself prepared the first version of the translation, after which it was then extensively worked over by Lawrence Newman together with Svatava Jakobson.[5]

Although the work is dedicated to Roman Jakobson, in the background lies a polemic with surrealist views on the substance and function of the artistic work, principally as their views took shape in the interwar years (which is the period when Jakobson worked closely with the Czech surrealists). The text is conceived polemically even in those passages where Effenberger doesn't explicitly discuss surrealism. Although the author deals with the entirety of surrealist theory, his deliberations are above all a response to the ideas of Karel Teige, the leading theoretician of the Czech avant-garde and, in the 1930s, of the Surrealist Group. Effenberger was Teige's most significant successor. Of course, the theoretical methods and the general approach to the issues discussed in "Journey to the Center of the Poem" are also markedly influenced by the functional structuralism of the Prague School.[6] Effenberger's decision to publish the piece in a work dedicated to Roman Jakobson was not then out of place. Nevertheless, Effenberger was above all influenced by the theoretical concepts of Teige. In spite of the fact that he implicitly argued with Teige and criticized him root and branch, he didn't abandon Teige's *method* of approaching artistic work and social issues related to it. To the contrary, Effenberger acknowledged, developed, and worked through Teige's conclusions in light of new artistic and psychosocial conditions. We can therefore conclude

[4] Vratislav Effenberger, "Journey to the Center of a Poem," in *To honor Roman Jakobson: Essays on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, 11 October 1966*, Vol. 1 (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1967), pp. 615–629.

[5] The translation published in this issue of *Contradictions* (pp. 173–189) was additionally revised by Greg Evans.

[6] Effenberger studied aesthetics under Felix Vodička (who had studied under Jan Mukařovský and became the best-known of his students) from 1945 to 1948.

that his critique of the surrealist worldview remained surrealist. It was not a matter of destroying surrealism but of reappraising it and developing it further.

So that we can more deeply grasp the meaning of Effenberger's article, we must discuss at least some of Karel Teige's theorems regarding creation of an artistic work, its functions, and its semiotics. We will purposely set aside the development of Teige's thought and the transformations that took place within it, only engaging with those of his ideas that we consider to be most fundamental from the point of view of "Journey to the Center of the Poem."

Teige, very much in harmony with the foundational views of surrealism, believed that an artistic work was the most direct expression of the unconscious (repressed) tendencies contained in the psychic life of a human being.[7] Nonetheless, the information that a modern work of art should communicate isn't of the same nature as the rational meaning that flows from a classical work of art. When Teige develops his concept of the semantics of the imaginative work, he emphasizes the way this imaginative work evolutionarily differentiates itself from the primarily realistically- or rationalistically-oriented works of art of previous eras. In the sphere of the transfer of information, Teige distinguishes rational *comprehension* (*rozumění*) from irrational, inspirational *communication* (*sdělení*) or *sharing* (*sdílení*). *Comprehension* can be achieved by means of the traditional art work. The meaning of such works relies on the existence of an external idea or on conventional symbolism of the allegorical type.

Communication or *sharing* does not, however, function the same way as to *comprehension*. The subject matter of *communication* is irrational information, which should be produced by unconscious tendencies. Such a message does not differ from the rational, conceptual one only because it has this different, irrational content. It is not a transfer of unconscious content from one consciousness to another. Such a message is different *essentially*.[8] Its meaning has a potential and dynamic nature:

> We must see the artistic work and the viewer in a dialectical relationship; we must view the work and the contemplation of it as dialectical antitheses, and we

[7] "[The modern artistic work should be] a direct expression of the mental life of the work's author, an expression of his unconscious lyricism." Karel Teige, "Úvod do moderního malířství [Introduction to modern painting]," in Karel Teige, *Zápasy o smysl moderní tvorby: Studie z třicátých let* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1969), pp. 253–267, here 264.

[8] We will leave aside the plausible and legitimate criticism that it is not possible to lay down such a direct and radical opposition between the semantic formations of classical and modern art as the differentiation between "comprehension" and "sharing" forces upon us. Teige's deliberations are here historically conditioned and restricted by the influence of avant-garde radicalism. This fact does not, however, call into question the basis of his thinking. We believe, in addition, that in the later phases of Teige's theoretical system it would be possible to confront such an objection with, e.g., his thesis about the trans-historical existence of "fantastic art."

> must seek the proper, true living poem in the synthesis of the two antitheses. If it is said that a poem, even if it goes unread, remains a poem, it is necessary to fulfill this potentiality with the Mallarméan edict that that the poem is only made complete and fully poetic in the reader's mind.[9]

What, it might be asked, is *communicated* in this way? And how is the possibility of such *communicability* guaranteed? We already indicated that, in the classical painting, the guarantor was the existence of an exterior theme. In the imaginative work, the guarantor is the communicability founded on the existence of unconscious individual and collective complexes. Even individuals who are not directly affected by such complexes have a predisposition to them.

> To the question as to how it is possible for an artistic work to be communicable even outside of the sphere of universal primitive complexes and their universal allegories, and how it is possible for the viewer to react to the artists' individual, private complexes, we respond by saying that in art it is not about individual trauma but about the propensities from which the trauma is born, and these propensities are shared by a great number of people, perhaps even the majority them (Jean Frois-Wittman, "L'Art [sic!] et le principe du plaisir," *Minotaure*).[10] The stronger the sense in an artistic work of the secret, the latent, and the instinctive, the stronger will be the viewer's emotions.[11]

Note that Teige is not saying here that these complexes themselves or the tendencies towards them are the subject-matter of communication! Unconscious tendencies and complexes are only *that which is common*, which assures the possibility of irrational communication, and which intensifies it. To the contrary, the viewer or reader draws the concrete "content" of the transmission directly from their own subjectivity in a dialectical relationship with the work (see above). In Teige's concept, the semantic dialectic of the subjective and the objective formally duplicates the dialectic of the particular and the universal.[12]

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 266.

[10] Teige misquotes the title of the article, which should read "L'Art moderne et le principe du plaisir," *Minotaure* 1 (1933), no. 3–4, pp. 79–80.

[11] Teige, "Úvod do moderního malířství," p. 271.

[12] Here, of course, we can open up the possibility of a comparison between Teige's models and the structuralist differentiation between *langue* and *parole* and with the corresponding, rich philosophical implications and development of those concepts. This opportunity we must regrettably leave aside for the time being.

> The particular concrete and abstract images, which might in each receptive viewer awaken personal, subjective ideas, feelings, or memories, are generally and therefore "objectively" effective, forming a common ground of communication between the reader and the poet, a terrain where even the reader feels at home in his own lyricism of ideas, memories, and inner life. Certain images, forms, metaphors, words, and objects act in an appealing way on the imagination of both poets and readers, both viewers and painters, *without their being universal symbols* as they are understood by psychoanalysis.[13]

In this way the irrational, imaginative meanings of the modern artistic work are *shared*. Their message isn't primarily discursive, but emotional. It would however be a mistake to suppose that their value lacks a social function. For Teige, the principal meaning and value of art rests precisely in its social impact. Karel Teige was one of the most important interwar Czech Marxist theorists. He saw society in its historical and economic concreteness as deeply unjust due to the influence of capitalist exploitation. Contrary to many of his contemporaries, he emphasized that the poverty caused by capitalism isn't only economic, but broadly human; it is a poverty at the expense of the richness of humanity's relation to the world.[14]

Teige's communist modernism of the 1930s assumed that, in the future, a classless society would mean the *integral* freedom of man. Humanity will not only rid itself of economic misfortune, but it will also become possible for it to fully utilize its own abilities, to engage in a rich intercourse both with the world and with itself. This integral modernist idea, which posits a homology between psychological and social freedom, represents the horizon of Teige's thinking about the value and social functions of poetry.

> It is from philosophy that we receive the most basic criterion [for attaining scholarly knowledge of the value of an artistic work]: freedom. Hegel conceived of the history of humanity as a pathway to freedom. Marx sketched out the upward, serpentine path from the "realm of necessity" to the "realm of freedom." And Šalda[15] showed that the totality of the evolution of art made freedom larger and higher! Freedom in the conception and choice of a theme, freedom in the creative methods, the freedom of fantasy and imagination. What is necessary is to [...] ascertain whether a certain work or artistic movement fulfills a progressive mission in the sense laid out by the pathway to the *realm of freedom*! [...] Face to face with

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 272.

[14] Teige came to this conclusion before the publication in 1932 of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which he naturally began making use of in his own theories as soon as he became familiar with them.

[15] František Xaver Šalda (1867–1937), often considered the leading Czech literary critic of his day.

> the artistic work, we shall ask how to effectively make the path to that freedom ever broader and higher. How to free ourselves from inherited conventions and how to free the mind of the artist and reader. We shall ask whether in a given work we can find out – and it will scarcely ever be an unequivocal matter – if it is governed by a progressive or a regressive tendency and function. How and if this work points to the liberation of the human mind, not forgetting that the general precondition of the freedom of the mind is, on the sociological-economic plane, the social emancipation of the human being. At this point the critique transcends the boundaries of art and crosses over into the critique of life.[16]

He describes in an uncommonly vivid way the force and diversity of the psychological freedom that the making of a surrealist work brings to bear:

> Surrealist pictures and poems demand that the viewer and reader perceive them as though they too were poets; during the quiet contemplation when we hear the agitations of the unconscious, the images reverberate in the viewer like the strings of a musical instrument whose music, in daily life, has been forgotten or renounced; the images loosen the interplay of memories and associations; they are born from the glimmerings that emanate from imagination and fantasy, whether they be tender or cruel, tranquil or frenzied, illogical or destructive, awakening imaginative currents in the reader's imagination.[17]

In the sense, discussed above, of the homology of psychological and social freedom operating under the assumption of the integral freedom that would prevail in a classless society – which still, in the 1930s, seemed a real historical possibility[18] – Teige's theory of the surrealist revival of emotionality could appear as an authentic, socially subversive act. And not only subversive, but also as a literally *revolutionary* act that is concrete to the extent that concrete future freedom is assumed in the communist revolutionary project.

> Imagination and fantasy evidently play a subversive role in surrealism, putting into effect the most improbable things without it being possible to deny them: the miracles of fantasy are an effective indictment of desolate societal reality, and

[16] Karel Teige, "K aktuálním otázkám kulturního života," in Karel Teige, *Osvobozování života a poezie: Studie ze čtyřicátých let* (Prague: Aurora 1994), pp. 138–139.

[17] Teige, "Úvod do moderního malířství," p. 274.

[18] In the post-war phase of his thinking, Teige moved from the concept of "freedom" (*svoboda*) to the more dynamic concept of "becoming free" or "liberation" (*osvobozování*). He nevertheless maintained the assumption of a homology between social and psychological freedom. Cf. Karel Teige, "K českému překladu Prokletých básníků [On the Czech translation of the *poètes maudits*]," in Teige, *Osvobozování života a poezie*, pp. 140–148.

> their revolutionary character resides in the fact that they render institutions and the realities of the social order deeply suspect, for they supply a person with the suspicion that in the imaginary world there resides a freedom that has been driven out from our despotic social reality, and that it is necessary by way of revolutionary transformation to also make the real world into a *realm* of this *freedom*."[19]

In Effenberger's "Journey to the Center of a Poem," the word "freedom" – used in this sense – is not to be found anywhere. A fundamental shift takes place between Effenberger's and Teige's views in regard to the purpose of imaginative creation. While in Teige's conception freedom is the specific, ultimate meaning of art, and the artistic work is in this way a means of liberation, Effenberger's formulation in this context refers to an epistemological function – that is, to attaining knowledge of reality, penetrating into "raw reality" ("It is necessary…that subjective deformation become a means of realization" [p. 183]; "[…] suddenly capable of perceiving the precise and astonishing relations surrounding the most innocent stimulus, which leads – in the discharges of black humor – to a more profound orientation within that which is designed to drown the spirit" [p. 185]; "[…] poetic mystification is one of the most effective ways by which, within the human intellect and imagination, the sense of reality, that irreplaceable motor of life and poetry, is sharpened and strengthened,"[20] and so on). The element of freedom and liberation is of course a part of the polemical function of the artistic work, but it is a freedom mostly realized by way of cognition.[21] It naturally does not have any sort of discursive quality but is rather a special type of signal for consciousness:

> After the great hope for a symbiosis of the revolutionary forces of reconstruction in art and in society, disillusion had to set in for us to realize that artistic creation had the same signal function in social life as does a high fever in the human organism, and that consequently it is incapable of taking over any tasks which ensue from any organized effort whatsoever. All systems of the association of imaginative ideas, in so far as they can be considered authentic, are subjected to a signal function which is both provoked and provocative, through which the imagination claims its social significance. (P. 184)

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 269–270.

[20] This passage was omitted from the English version of "Journey to the Center of the Poem" that Effenberger prepared for publication. The original passage appears in the Czech/Slovak part of Contradictions 2018, p. 141.

[21] For Effenberger's later views on the possibility of human freedom, see František Dryje and Šimon Svěrák, "Zpověď dítěte svého vzteku [The confession of a child of anger]," in Vratislav Effenberger, *Republiku a varlata* (Prague: Torst, 2012), pp. 271–320, especially 307–319.

It is just this "disillusion" that is a source of the transformation of artistic creation after the Second World War; it was also one of Effenberger's motivations for reassessing surrealist conceptions, including those of Teige. This disillusion led indirectly both to a greater emphasis on the conscious element of the creative process and to a reworking of the relationship of art to reality .

When Effenberger observes that "[p]oetic value is not identical with emotionality, for it is of a more active, more imperative nature" (p. 176), he implicitly turns against Teige. The "active" and "imperative" nature resides in the fact that the poem transforms our perception of reality. It is not only a matter of more fully and more authentically experiencing reality, as was the case with Teige, but also of semantically rearranging reality and reassessing it (the poem "conquers the world in order to lend it new meanings" [*ibid.*]). Further on in the text Effenberger will write in this regard about the "polemical stimuli" contained in the work (*ibid.*)[22] and precisely there, in them, he will find the meaning that is specific to poetic expression.

> The true value and meaning of the artistic work does not reside in some specific qualities of external or internal models, nor even in the authenticity of the expression itself, but rather in the way the work polemicizes with its era.[23]

We showed that for Teige the assumption of the homology between psychological and social freedom secured a direct connection between the authenticity of expression (the work as a "direct expression of the mental life of the author") and its subversive, revolutionary tendencies. The homology he presented was mediated by the eschatological understanding of communistic, classless society as a space of absolute, integral freedom. For Teige, each *true* liberation must be liberation in the sense of the realization of socialism because, according to him, only under communism will true freedom be achieved. The prospect of a future, just society, socially concreticizing psychological authenticity, opens an artistic semiosis in the direction of the politically unambiguous liberation of the human mind.

In Teige's interpretation, the semantic stabilization of the imaginative artistic object was implicitly mediated by a Marxist worldview, which was heteronomous to the artistic work.

[22] In his later writings, Effenberger adopts the terminological designation "the critical function of concrete irrationality" for all of these "stimuli."

[23] This passage too was omitted from the English version of "Journey to the Center of the Poem" that Effenberger prepared for publication. The original passage appears in the Czech/Slovak part of Contradictions 2018, p. 141.

Although Effenberger didn't give up on an underlying Marxist point of view,[24] the failure of communism in the Soviet Union, the experience of the Second World War, and also his later experience with the real functioning of the politics of the Eastern and Western Blocs, absolutely discredited all of Marxism's eschatological and utopian dimensions – as reported above, "disillusion" set in. The idea of a truly historically attainable integral freedom was gone, and with it were the prerequisites for postulating a direct connection between psychological authenticity and the creation of a societal space for the maximum self-realization of the individual and humanity.

Just as artistic work changed in reaction to this situation, so did theoretical models reflecting to the genesis and interpretation of this work. Effenberger's model from "Journey to the Center of the Poem" shifts the social, subversive aspects of art from a sphere heteronomous to the creative process into the very structure of this process. For Effenberger, a poetic manifestation in the sense of an imaginative expression founded in unconscious, that is, repressed, tendencies (Teige's concept, and also the traditional surrealist concept), only represents the background or one pole of the process of the semantic formation of an artistic work. The second pole is mediated by a critical consciousness of social reality, that is, by human discontent with that which is to the detriment of what could be. According to Effenberger, the seemingly unbound images racing through our consciousness function as a means thanks to which we can concreticize our discontent with the world, a discontent which would otherwise remain unexpressed and so outside of awareness. It is conscious, but it lacks language, a code, speech – it is too indistinct for us to become aware of it other than through the language of the imagination.

> The emotional and consequently also the social efficacy of the symbol does not result from a free automatic movement of the imagination. It results from a determined, more or less conscious critical eliminative effort by which a polemic relationship is realized between the artist and social reality, a relationship which activates not only the mental attitude but also the very life orientation of man. […] [P]erceptual material which invites every psychologically active person to project into it his own contemplative, even if poetically conceived, impulses, or to project them from it elsewhere. Every real creation is conscious to the extent to which its inspiration is a protest against a concrete evil, even when it intends to be nothing more than a confession. (P. 181)

[24] Effenberger continually reassessed his position on Marxism throughout the whole of his life. As he approached the end of it, a decidedly reserved approach held sway (cf. Effenberger, *Republiku a varlata*). From today's perspective we would conclude that, in light of the evolution of Marxism in the Western Bloc (which, due to the political circumstances of the time, Effenberger had little possibility of interacting with), in the whole of his work Effenberger never in any substantive way broke with Marxism.

The revolutionary function of art in Teige's thinking becomes, for Effenberger, a polemical function. That is to say that polemic, as opposed to the revolutionary endeavor, need not be conscious of its final purpose. The polemic may arise from disputes or inhospitable situations, to which it reacts without offering an explicit, alternative solution. In Effenberger's theoretical conception, its entrance into the creative process concreticizes the work of art to such a degree that its effect is no longer described as only being "emotional"; rather – as we already mentioned – Effenberger attempts to comprehend it with the concepts "imperative" and "active." For Teige, writes Effenberger, this imperative resided outside of the work (in the heteronomous sphere of Marxist ideology). The viewer or the reader would see the discrepancy between the fullness of the world and the human relationship to it being expressed in a poem or painting and the shabby, daily reality of capitalist society. In "Journey to the Center of the Poem," Effenberger argues that this discrepancy should already be contained in the semantic structure of the work itself.

These fundamental shifts in the semantic shaping of artistic work – brought about by the "disillusion" from the actual possibility of fulfilling revolutionary hopes and achieving integral freedom and, at the same time, motivated by the continued need to react to social reality – are not of course without influence on the general relationship of artistic work to reality. Effenberger noticed that when a work is affected by a conscious, polemical tendency, its absurdity exhibits a special type of logic, a certain inner order; it reaches closer to reality, it closely resembles reality's conventional form so that the work, as a certain form of *poetic mystification*, can recognize and discredit this conventional reality. Such a poetic mystification should "lend its subject the appearance of objectivity, adjust reality such that it appears as little deformed as possible."[25] Its own sense then rests in being "one of the most effective ways by which, within the human intellect and imagination, the sense of reality, that irreplaceable motor of life and poetry, is sharpened and strengthened." The poetic expression as mystification does not want to abandon the significant features of reality. Reality there then looks rational and absurd at the same time.

The semantics of the imaginative work is understood in this model of Effenberger's to be socially and historically determined. Effenberger also follows Teige in his attempt to capture the work's general semiotic structure. He cites Teige's study on Toyen's graphic series *Střelnice* (The shooting gallery) and further elaborates his theory of the symbol. Worth noting here is that Effenberger describes the dynamic meaning in the artwork as an "impulse" which does not convey the meaning as such but, in the reader's or viewer's mind, creates "*very conductive tensions* into which even mutually contrastive

[25] This passage and the one that immediately follows it were, again, omitted from the English version of Effenberger's article. The original passages appear in *Contradictions* 2 (2018), no. 1, pp. 140-141.

symbolizing meanings can be introduced" (p. 189, emphasis mine). Here then we are very much in the realm of Teige's *sharing*, placed opposite *comprehending*. In "Journey to Center of the Poem," however, *sharing* is internally worked out by the polemical moments of poetry.

In this stage of the development of his theoretical system, that is, when he wrote *Pohyby symbolů* (1961), Effenberger considered the emphasis he was placing on the role of consciousness in the creative process to be incompatible with surrealism as such. He only considered surrealism to be a point of departure for his deliberations, as a phenomenon that had been historically surpassed was still in the process of being surpassed, but which opened up a certain new problematic. By the time he condensed his study into the form of the article being discussed here, in 1966, he once again considered himself to be a surrealist. He did not however change any of the theoretical models described in *Pohyby smbolů*. He only weakened some of the formulations that had been aimed against surrealism.[26] It was not a capricious change of heart, but rather an intensive five-year period during which Effenberger came to the conclusion that "the refurbishment of imaginative expression is feasible in its [surrealism's] own structure or, more precisely, by its own structure."[27]

In "Journey to the Center of the Poem," the author develops the meaning of the concept of consciousness quite freely and poetically, and it isn't quite clear what exactly should be included within it. It is, however, apparent that the polemical moments of artistic creation originate from it. From the context of Effenberger's deliberations we can surmise that "consciousness" does not so much represent the reflected moments of a mental life as it does the mental contents that are somehow reflectable (probably with the help of the imagination) and that have most likely a predominately concep-

[26] For example, let us take the following sentence in *Pohyby symbolů* (1961): "If, in his definition, Nezval identifies poetic image with symbol – 'the free movement of the imagination is nothing but a movement of symbols directed by the subconscious' – we have no doubt that there Nezval is paying for the *faith* that surrealists *of that era* placed in the omnipotence of chance and of the subconscious." In "Journey to the Center of the Poem" (1966), Effenberger changes this to: "If in his definition he identifies in his definition poetic image and symbol – 'the free movement of the imagination is nothing but a movement of symbols directed by the unconscious' – we have no doubt that there Nezval is paying for his *much too mechanical* surrealist *trust* in the omnipotence of chance and of the subconscious." (This issue of *Contradictions*, p. 181, in both citations the emphasis is mine.)

[27] "'Opustíš-li mě, zahyneš' přestává být v surrealismu tupým bonmotem (rozhovor Martina Stejskala s Vratislavem Effenbergerem) [In surrealism, 'If you abandon me, you will die' ceases to be an empty phrase (interview with Vratislav Effenberger by Martin Stejskal)]," *Analogon* 16 (2004), no. 41–42, pp. 62–65, here 65. My extensive essay on Vratislav Effenberger in *The International Encyclopedia of Surrealism*, edited by Michael Richards, et al. (forthcoming), addresses in more detail the problematic of Effenberger's assessment of the continuity of surrealism.

tual nature. This surmise is to a certain extent confirmed by the further evolution of Effenberger's system.[28]

This radical emphasis on consciousness represents an extreme theoretical attitude in the framework of the evolution of surrealist views. Effenberger will progressively work through and dialecticize the role of consciousness in relation to the imagination and its manifestations.[29] Somewhat in conflict with the Teigean point of departure, "Journey to the Center of the Poem" denies the unconscious a more substantial, meaning-generating capacity. Its irrational manifestations are understood as mere "material" that enables us to formulate, on the boundary between the conceptual and the imaginative,[30] our own polemical point of view regarding the world. As we have seen, Effenberger's greater emphasis on the conscious component was brought about by the need to reflect on the transformation of the subversive meanings of the imaginative work in its historical and social situation, when it could no longer simply rely on a modernist-conceived Marxist historical perspective, as was the case with Karel Teige. We are convinced that these ideas of Effenberger's have a wider validity and are of use beyond the boundaries of the surrealist worldview, especially in that area of the theory of art that builds on dialectical principles and for which the art work is, above all, considered to be of interest for its social and political functions.

[28] Cf., e.g., Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poesie* [Reality and poetry] (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1969); see, above all, the concluding section of the book, also titled "Realita a poesie," pp. 275–351.

[29] Cf. Šimon Svěrák, "Strukturalistická inspirace v surrealistické (psycho)ideologii Vratislava Effenbergera [Structuralist inspiration in the surrealist (psycho)ideology of Vratislav Effenberger]," in Landa and Mervart (eds.), *Imaginace a forma,* pp. 131–150.

[30] We should remember here that the opposition imaginative – conceptual does not, of course, map onto the opposition unconscious – conscious or irrational – rational. All three areas mutually overlap.

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE POEM*

Vratislav Effenberger

It is true that some attention has been given to the methods of poetry interpretation. This attention, however, was not so great as to eliminate, even partially, those notorious inanities which begin "what did the poet mean" or, on the other hand, to eliminate the imperative professional deciphering of symbols which jealously wields the universal master key to all the poetic treasures of the world. The very vague assumption that there exists some mysterious code which one is able to acquire only gradually and with difficulty has a soporific influence, as does the notion that one is capable of grasping the lapidary message of the poem only to the extent that one has mastered this code. The poet himself has been separated here from his poem by a barrier of aesthetic conventions. What is decisive is not what he says, but rather what I – a literary

* Originally published in *To honor Roman Jakobson: Essays on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, 11 October 1966*, Vol. 1 (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1967), pp. 615–629. The translators of the text are not indicated. It was probably translated by Effenberger himself, along with Svatava Jakobson and Lawrence Newman. Greg Evans and Šimon Svěrák have introduced further corrections. In the earlier translation, French citations were left in French. For publication in *Contradictions* we have translated these passages into English according to already published translations. If a translation wasn't available, we have undertaken the translation ourselves.

somnabulist – think he meant to say. There is a general "professional" mistrust of the literal meaning of a poem.

He who is again and again ready to rush to the window whenever he hears "it's going to rain cats and dogs," certainly has a more active imagination and greater poetic disposition than those who simply note that it will pour rain. He is capable of respecting the original meaning of words and things and is not imprisoned by language conventions whose models condemn him to move with dulling passivity in front of their barrier. He has the capacity to draw reality nearer, undistorted by habit or by established literary or aesthetic attitudes. He has the capacity at any moment to find reality in its critical relationship to these customary adaptations, to see it each time for the most part anew in order to project his own self onto it and into it more accurately and penetratingly from the spillways of the imagination and intellect. The numerous testimonies of poets seem to indicate that this very state of mind, this permanent readiness of the imagination, is a necessary prerequisite and predisposition for a politically uncommitted, yet socially and psychologically aggressive poetry.

A stand against poetic license, against a vague and limiting aesthetic convention, against the literarily mechanical captivity of poetry, is one of the basic functions of a free poem. This stand, manifested in a spontaneity of contact between the poet and the reader, is brought about by that spontaneity of contact between the poet and reality which is marked by an almost ruthless inspiration. It is in these spaces that the discharges take place between the poem – which is after all a fact of art – and reality, to which the opposite pole of the poem is connected; such discharges between unifying opposites give life both to the poem and to our awareness of reality. We have to yield to the poet and not impose our own abstract aesthetic criteria. Poetry is not algebra, whatever the poets themselves may say about it. What does it matter if it can be attested that the poet was a symbolist or that he considered himself one. His poems in their magical space, and he himself, live solely by the fact that they are able to focus upon themselves ever new interpretations and investigations that might be mutually dissimilar but which usually repeatedly inspire us into further mental and sensate directions, thus setting in motion further developmental cycles.

> When it comes to language, the point, so they say, is to make oneself understood. Understood? Understood by myself no doubt, when I listen to myself as children do when they clamor for the next installment of a fairy tale. Make no mistake about it, I know what all my words mean and syntax comes to me *naturally* [...] There was once someone unscrupulous enough to include a note in an anthology that listed some of the images that occur in the work of one of our greatest living poets; it read:
>
> A *caterpillar's morning after in evening dress* means: a butterfly.
>
> *Breast of crystal* means: a carafe.

> Etc. No, my gentle sir: *does not mean*. Put your butterfly back in your carafe. Rest assured, what Saint-Pol-Roux meant to say, he said.[1]

What can Louis Aragon say to oppose Breton's viewpoint if, in *Le Musée Grévin,* he asserts that scholarly commentators dealt a sharp blow to the mystery which enshrouded the poetry of Nerval, Rimbaud, Lautreamont, Mallarmé, and Apollinaire, a mystery that stemmed from the mistakes in the text and inaccuracies in the copies! It was evidently only those errors and inaccuracies which made the names of these cursed poets so renowned that Aragon the editor thought them worth rescuing for the purposes of the Literature of Engagement. His "scholarly commentators" crept up to these works long after the works had set in motion a whole new cycle of poetic thinking. In spite of the extreme nature of his expression, Breton's approach to interpretation is more sober and realistic than the pompous explanations of busybodies who try to distil from flexible reality a modicum of conventional pathos.

The problem of interpretation deserves our particular attention in more respects than one. The existing artistic movements have concentrated too much attention on the problems of composition. They have not tried to penetrate into that interesting area where a work of art acquires its meaning, where for the first time it becomes an actual message and where there seems to prevail an omnipotent anarchy of opinions. Although interpretative viewpoints are latently contained in the more or less evident social aspects of theories of creative systems, there is a method of interpretation that is, for the most part, merely presupposed if these theories are generally to be concerned with nothing more than an introduction to the problems of writing, an elucidation of viewpoints, or an a priori influencing of the public. Of course this has little in common with the way in which the work is received by the public at different times and places. Interpretative processes are very complex, live, and subject to change, and it is by way of this very nature of theirs that they are analogous to the actual creative process, at least in that part where the interpreter's active imagination or intellect takes over from the work some stimuli and from them builds its own interpretation almost to the point of being a further artistic expression. It suffices to mention as an extreme but characteristic case the high poetic intensity which Freud's imagination gave to *Gradiva*, a rather insignificant novelette by Jensen who escaped oblivion only because his work happened into the hands of the great poet of psycho-analysis at the right moment. A work of art changes and multiplies in time, space, and causality: it ceases to be itself and absorbs all the relationships by which it has been and is being realized so long as it is so configured by its complex relation to reality, and so long as it is binding, authentic,

[1] André Breton, "Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality," *October* 69 (1994), pp. 133–144, here 141.

and thus inspiring, and contains polemical stimuli. It is not some abstract, atemporal, and defining value stipulated by the "artist's genius," a value which can be guaranteed by authoritative judgments, but rather currents of intellectual and emotional interests which seize the work from the moment of its publication. If we were able to strip Shakespeare's *Macbeth* of the thick layer of these authoritative interpretations, of its own history in the development of art, there would remain in the hands of our "scholarly commentators" a rather lengthy and uninteresting play, hardly remarkable from the viewpoint of dramatic structure or poetic composition. Without changing a single word, there would remain in our fingers, instead of a beautiful medusa, only some small bit of slime. Fortunately for the worshippers of Shakespeare's genius, nothing of the kind is possible. Shakespeare's myth, the relations and interpretations through which his work has passed in the course of its distant journeys, are more powerful than our scholarly commentaries. We are in its power, we are in the power of a particular ritual in the creation of which we participate. We become its poets even if we should turn against it.

Being in the power of a poem does not mean giving up that individual system of thought from which our imagination is formed. Poetic value is not identical with emotionality, for it is of a more active, more imperative nature. Poetic value has its own firm order, its flexible yet well-defined structure. It is endowed with an individual formative ability through which it is continually involved with the polysemous contexts of reality. It has its own pros and cons, conflicts in which it conquers the world in order to lend it new meanings; it has its conscious and unconscious zones which connect it to our present life. It has its complex of active and passive attitudes which mutually exclude both the pathos of activity and the pathos of passivity. Through it we define ourselves.

Just as ideas combine with one another even at the moment when we are not directly occupied with their verbal expression (which has nothing to do with the particular function which the word-objects or work-fetishes within these ideas might have), the words combine to evoke – if we believe their original meaning – ideas of unusual emotional intensity. Idea-association does not yet mean word-association. If I see in a forest *a tree which resembles a gamekeeper*, it is not the same as if I suddenly recall the sentence *the girls were bending the wires*. Let us leave aside for the time being an attempt to compare the emotional values of these two statements. Instead we are interested here in their genetic definitions. At first glance, it is obvious that their origin is different. The first example is a simile – bold, yet still sufficiently suggestive to be considered a discovery in a certain context. In the other example, however, a rather complex transformation is at work, a real metamorphosis whose origin is usually attributed to psychic automatism or endophasy,[2] which is of far greater importance in poetry than the simple metaphor to which older poetry devoted a great deal of attention. This metamorphosis covers

[2] "[…] the habit of thinking in words, for in most cases it is speech itself, whether uttered aloud or silently, that gives birth to thought." Tristan Tzara, *Grains et issues* (Paris: Les Editions Denoel et Steele, 1935), p. 19.

a far greater and more variegated field of associations, forcing the active and the passive participants in the work of art (both the poet and the reader) to concentrate more intensely and to use their imagination more extensively. That is, this metamorphosis does not emerge from a continuous variable stream of associations which suddenly and without any context take on a more or less verbal shape. It comes to the fore and becomes more distinct than others by effecting a flash circuit between the subjective mental and objective exterior situations, thus becoming – within the range of its meaning – the bearer of their emotional value. The metamorphoses of authentic, not superficially "engaged" poetry presuppose a permanent readiness of imagination and an intellectual integrity. To the extent that we are able to give them such attention as they demand, we are inspired by them to discern their latent meaning on our own conceptual plane. We are inspired to determine their potential place in the global context of the poem, to determine their structure which reflects the structure of reality or into which the structure of reality is shifted if it is to have emotional importance for us. This idea, magic in its latent content and aggressive in its sudden and novel factuality, awakens us from the lethargy of conventional thinking to which practical life condemns its credulous penny-pinching savers. Conventional thinking becomes a deadening prison for the intellect if it is not overcome by the discharges of an imagination which, compared to it, has all the courage. The seeming unintelligibility of authentic poetry ensues first of all from the fallacious belief that the sentence which has suddenly emerged contains some concrete message which – however difficult it may be – can be deciphered. What did the poet want to say? That which he just said. If we shed that mistrust of the poet which makes "literature" out of poetry and add our imagination and intellect to the potential tension of an unexpected idea, letting ourselves be inspired in this way, we are no longer eager to translate the irrational message into rational speech. What we want is to develop this message further in its own designs as long as it stays in contact with what actually excites us. We participate in the poem in order to secure new dynamic positions toward factual stimuli.

I once had an occasion to watch a boy of perhaps five years sitting on the floor of a dark room in front of a big mirror. He was looking into the mirror – not at himself, but rather at the room beyond it. He sat motionless for a very long time and seemed fascinated with what he saw, with his own ideas. After a while he whispered: "And it was quiet like in a mirror." There was no exterior impulse motivating him to attract attention. He was all alone with his own impressions and ideas. Was he perceiving reality? Yes. He was finding stimuli which magnetized his cognitive ability, and he was focused, with no obligation towards any ready-made sophisticated intellectual categories, with no obligation towards organized thinking. He was perceiving reality and discerning exterior stimuli as they combined in his observational experience. Some might say that this observational experience was not extensive, while others would say that it was not marred by the depression of everyday life, which often pointlessly forces a person to translate every perception as fast as possible into clichés of "sensibility," the

value of which is subject to doubt, especially if we have an ever decreasing opportunity to admire it in actual life. What could be the difference between the child in front of the mirror and a poet? Perhaps only the fact that the poet can discern with greater certainty where to put those explosive charges of the imagination.

In its essence, perception is a classification. According to the way they classify, we may distinguish active types of people from passive types. The former tend to seek new connections, whereas the latter are content with the practical, conventional use of that which they perceive. This doesn't mean that the unveiling of new connections stands in opposition to their practical use; the function of this unveiling in the course of life, however, is more complex, more involved, and in a certain sense more fundamental.

A definite point of departure, a psychic situation, is essential for perception. Contrary to those inclined to be practical, the active and productive types with developed emotionality (whether it is applied in the field of art or elsewhere) perceive with greater and more varied care than the passive types. Of course, these active types needn't lose track of the factual meaning of the perception in the given plane of reality to which they more or less consciously relate everything that their imagination does with the apperception. The fact that we do not perceive everything that reality offers our senses and that only some of its components are capable of attracting and holding our interest is enough to expand infinitely the problems of the "theory of reflection." The impulse for perceiving ensues from our perceptual predisposition, which in no way ceases to be a result of external influences or psychic experience, whether we attribute to it a rational character or not. This very impulse is a component of mental activity which may be designated in terms of the theory of art as inspiration. For the most part, every act of perception is a subjectivization of that which is perceived, even if by immediate apperception we can verify the existence of a representational series which continually develops in our mind from every external stimulus. If we simultaneously integrate ourselves into reality through this subjectivization, this would constitute a dialectical unification of opposites which represents one of the most fundamental expressions of the dynamics of mental life.

For the problems of invention it is not decisive whether the object on which we concentrate is situated in an aesthetically conditioned environment (a painting, an exhibition, a book) or if it lies outside it, as an aesthetically unarranged component of so-called objective reality. The decisive factor of invention is a predisposition to place this object in a definite system of the imagination. We are unable to change reality; but we can incorporate a certain part of it into further contexts which mark us, which are an expression of our ways, our attitude towards the world.

A representation is an apperception which has passed through the individualization and subjectivization process of our conceptual system and has thus become a creative component of our intellect, our style. If we can consider a representation as completed at a certain moment, it contains all stylistic components which individualize not only our expression, but also our way of thinking.

A representation as a subjectivization of reality is the basis of remembering. It is this basis because remembering incorporates still further variable mental activities which as a rule are not permanently connected with a definite idea. In this sense, the idea brings a distant reality nearer to us through "the eyes" of our own "invisible" person, similar to what happens in a dream.

A representation consolidated in our mind through any influence whatever becomes a fixed idea which no longer retains the conditions of its origin, but is capable of becoming an independent bearer of the most varied affects, often contrary to those which brought it into being and consolidated it. In such cases the radius of the representation – most frequently open to receiving a new representational series – becomes set, and in this state it is capable of playing a special role in composition and style. The fact that a fixed representation with its closed character isolates itself from the current of transforming mental activities, and thus to a great extent becomes objectivized anew, prepares it to enter again the subjectivization process. This time, however, it no longer enters as a new apperception, but as a stylistic phenomenon which can assume further communicative functions.

Often there is no direct dependence between a representation and its expression. The search for proper wording or additional stylistic arrangement attests that the representation is a kind of internal model, so that anyone who wants to express the representation strives to cast it as accurately as possible. However, this internal model, even in the form given it by surrealism, is not a concept sufficiently elastic to depict or even characterize the complexity of mental activities touched off by the creative interaction between the representation and its expression. The representation is not static; moreover, often it may not be definite or conscious at the moment when an already-begun sentence or verse evokes a certain atmosphere whose full plasticity still lacks something: the author seems to have this within reach, but he cannot express it just then, and the idea overtakes him before the completion of the sentence. Jan Mukařovský once drew attention to Vladislav Vančura's statement about the far reaching stimuli which the poet discovers in a dictionary: "If we knock at the spine of a dictionary with our finger, the splendid semantic isolation changes and a great many of these words will relate to some context."[3]

Naturally, only an impulse may be involved here because even when he yields to chance, the poet yields only seemingly: actually, he selects. This selection is not without a defining relationship to the representational environment in which his imagination happens to find itself in the moment. This means that the current of representations, momentarily interrupted, seeks allies in the defense against that stylistic regulation which naturally leads from reality into literature. Chance, an external intervention, is supposed to renew the contact of the poet with raw reality: not for the embellishment

[3] Jan Mukařovský, "Jazyk, který básní [Language that Makes Poetry]," in Bohuslav Havránek, Jan Mukařovský, and Felix Vodička (eds.), *O básnickém jazyce* (Prague: Svoboda, 1947), pp. 7–17, here 13.

of a verse, not for aesthetic considerations, but out of a need to refresh contact among representations in the interest of improving their plasticity and capturing a deeper communicational position. "In the poet's consciousness the sentence intonation – a purely linguistic matter – precedes the content of the sentence,"[4] adds Mukařovský. However, this sentence intonation is not without an important relationship to the preceding content of the representation; it is evoked by the rhythm of the content which we shall consider, with less assurance than Mukařovský, to be a linguistic phenomenon, for it is too closely connected with the representational environment that can be separated from which the linguistic viewpoint only by force and after the fact. In an extreme case, we can understand it as a psycho-philological formation, while its philological component could be judged independently only if the old positivist premise of the dualism of content and form were revived.

In his book *Modern Trends in Poetry*, Vítězslav Nezval tries to characterize the difference between a simile and an image in poetry:

> A poetic image is an association of two representations both of which are of equal importance [...] the way a chord in music is the result of a simultaneous sounding of several tones. [...] In the case of a simile, the comparing representation is of shorter duration in our imagination than the compared representation; it colors the compared representation and then disappears so that the compared representation stands out even more.[5]

What was valid for classical poetics is less and less valid for modern poetry. In the course of time both the image and the simile have multiplied their functions so much that if we have to recognize this multiplication, we cannot avoid replacing the obsolete terms with more accurate ones. In the course of newer symbolization processes, both the image and the simile lose their former functions as the chief bearers of the message. The verse becomes a sentence, although in a poem this sentence-verse has a different semantic structure than in speech or other verbal forms. At present, the symbolization process operates with more everyday and less aestheticized material than the older poetry did. Images and similes, to the extent they still occur, have a meaning that is no longer direct but rather secondary, and which may be ironic or sarcastic or may debase literary style. Nezval is mistaken when he thinks that "a poetic image is a result of a free automatic movement of the imagination, controlled by the requirements of our unconscious [...] it is thus a symbol, and its logical uncontrollability is not at all to its detriment but to its benefit."[6]

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[5] Vítězslav Nezval, "Dvojí obraznost [Double Imagination]," in Vítězslav Nezval, *Moderní básnické směry* (Prague: Dědictví Komenského, 1937), pp. 9–25, here 13–14.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

If in his definition he identifies poetic image and symbol – "the free movement of the imagination is nothing but a movement of symbols directed by the unconscious"[7] – we have no doubt that there Nezval is paying for his much too mechanical surrealist trust in the omnipotence of chance and of the unconscious. The emotional and consequently also the social efficacy of the symbol does not result from a free automatic movement of the imagination. It results from a determined, more or less conscious critical eliminative effort by which a polemic relationship is realized between the artist and social reality, a relationship which activates not only the mental attitude but also the very life orientation of man. What Nezval considers the motive essence of poetry is nothing but perceptual material which invites every psychologically active person to project into it his own contemplative, even if poetically conceived, impulses, or to project them from it elsewhere. Every real creation is conscious to the extent to which its inspiration is a protest against a concrete evil, even when it intends to be nothing more than a confession.

The calloused hand of the poet completes the dramatic form. The verse tries in vain to attract attention. Nothing can be heard. Once more Josef Dobrovský's scrutinizing ear stoops to listen. Nothing. The verse is dead. The tradition of noble amalgams, those frolicsome or tragic aggregates, as remarkable as they are soothing – all that sank into the darkness of literary history. The structure of the classical verse could not bear that subtle yet brutal load with which the reality of the twentieth century inscribes itself into the poets' imagination. With what satisfaction we were able to follow here František Halas's intense mutilation of verse forms, those pastorals played on a broken organ.

The artificial rhythm of poetic composition, given by one dominant prosodic system, has become the antithesis of another natural rhythm whose character is determined not only by the nature of the language but also – and above all – by a special type of emphasis that is one of the communicative functions of the poem. The verse which has changed into a sentence, into a certain reflection of the emotional level, had to lose its connection with classical prosody if it was to come nearer to the sweeping current of affective thinking and become its bearer.

For a long time I thought that the use of bound, rhymed verse in Czech poetry terminated with Nezval. He made it contemporary by the naturalness of language, freed it of the deposits of license and alliteration, and made it navigable for a free stream of imaginative thinking. The conflict between this thinking and the prosodic order, which he ingeniously destroyed, was the contribution of the Nezval period. It was Karel Hynek in the *Little Lord's Diary* who discovered that the rhyme, as an essential component of bound verse, as a literary and aesthetic phenomenon, could also be used in an anti-literary and anti-aesthetic sense. Here literary aestheticism is criticized by an ironic attitude towards its elevated style, that is, criticized by means of cynicism. In this work, the aesthetic function of the rhyme and bound verse, as it was left by Nezval,

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

is dragged by the hair; it is degraded, and this degradation itself becomes a part of the communicative function. The ironic attitude taken toward prosody makes the poetic message more profound and gives it a characterizing mission.

Rhyme as a mnemonic device lost its original meaning long ago. When the poetists[8] attributed to it an associative efficacy that could "connect distant wastelands, times, breeds and castes with harmony of word" and could "create miraculous friendships,"[9] in no way did they affect its traditional significance, for this associative and inventive ability was brought about not by the rhyme alone, but rather by the provocative courage to form metaphors for which the rhyme was but a means. In this sense, the poetists stressed the mere decorativeness of the rhyme, which they enlivened through topical associations. These inventive kinships escape their aesthetic lot only when the cadence of the rhymed poem creates some sort of emotive, grotesquely hyperbolic vibrations whose associative faculty spreads like an echo through the imagination of the reader. The power of inspiration exceeds the limits of the poem and penetrates to further sources.

The diction of Apollinaire's verse made such an impact on the development of poetry that it opened up a new epoch. It destroyed the former artificial unity of the poem in order to replace it with a far more substantial integrity. It contemporized sensibility. A narrative tone and accidental rhymes, a new interrupted rhythm which became the new rhythm, an aggressiveness of poetic imagination and a feeling for its concreteness – all of these new elements of post-Apollinaire poetry could no longer be related to classical prosody, just as it is impossible to adapt classical prosody to this development of poetic creation. It became necessary to define new concepts.

The surrealist intervention shifted Apollinairian diction into the area of the unconscious, into the current of the so-called psychic automatism which the poets of Breton's movement believe evokes, as a dream does, latent symbolism, through which the lower strata of our ego speak. They were willing to yield completely, or at least for the most part, to creative passivity. Originally they intended to limit their creation to a mere recording of what they thought represented unconscious mental action, and they concentrated all their poetic activity upon the interpretation of these records. The poem was to become an expression, a spontaneous product of emotionality minimally deformed by creative will, whereby the emotionality was controlled by the significant power of unconscious mental processes. Although the participation of consciousness in poetic creation was to be eliminated, it was impossible, at least in the most intense

[8] Poetism (1923–1932) was an avant-garde movement in Czech poetry influenced by Apollinaire and his conception of poetry. In the early thirties it fused with surrealism. Its representative poet is Vítězslav Nezval; its representative theorist Karel Teige.

[9] Vítězslav Nezval, *Parrot on a Motorcycle: On Poetic Craft*, trans. Jennifer Rogers (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010), eighth page (unnumbered).

surrealist manifestations, to suppress conscious intervention entirely. It is more and more evident that no manifestation of emotionality can do without the participation of consciousness, even if it yields to all the hard blows of the imagination. It is necessary, it seems, that the agitated consciousness hold this manifestation up against external, rational conditions in the moment when they are already ceasing to exist as bearable conditions of life, in order that subjective deformation become a means of realization. Under these circumstances, the poem shed the last prosodic considerations and changed into a state of open thinking.

To be able to follow a free current of ideas, the poem maintains seemingly loose ties between sentences. This is contrary to prose which is based on a firmer context and which, in comparison with the inspirational flashes of the poem, represents a more systematic form of thinking.

If absurdity were only nonsense, that which within a certain expression has no limits, if it were nothing but a jumble of words or a dispersal of an image in the void of external fortuities, we could believe that imagination in art is nothing but various forms of metaphoric arrangement of the elements of reality which flourish into a style. It would be then possible to analyze this style with regard to given aesthetic criteria, to separate its correct constructions from inaccurate and false ones as teachers of shorthand or literary shepherds imagine it. However, what makes absurdity shocking is not what supplements the idyllicism of literature. Absurdity as an individually conditioned shift in attitude towards generally recognized values – potentially present in all forms of conflict between imagination and reason, keeping watch over the past and the future even as it leaves to reality all of its painted doors – has a firm order of its own which occupies a sort of paraposition relative to formal logic as well as to all forms of formal logic's negation. The order of absurdity is neither illogical or a-logical. It determines for the logic of situations a causality where the emotions are freed of accumulated conflicts which – even if they did not arise in opposition to a logical arrangement – are momentarily insolvable within the framework of this arrangement. It is probable that an ingenious analysis which subjected innumerable factors to a minute investigation might renew our belief in the shaken authority of "common sense"; but only at such time as we have also become convinced that we have acquired by this a universal code for deciphering any situation, which in itself is, of course, an absurd assumption. A peculiar type of immobility, together with involuntary humor create an optimum atmosphere for the imagination of present-day man. They incite the imagination against the Gordian Knot of insolvable situations in which we are supposed to live and which are supposed to beat up on us so that we become digestible to the blunting mechanisms of life.

Anonymous authors of absurd anecdotes are usually remarkable poets. It is of no consequence whether or not they are aware of what they are doing. They have invented a game, given it form and suddenly everything else becomes magnetized. They play, giving full reign to a mysterious logic and bringing the natural encounters of logic into

play with that which passes it by in real life. From the standpoint of the type of creation under consideration here, there ensues from this game a rare futile irreconcilability with absurd phenomena. These phenomena, although blessed by the highest authorities, are unacceptable to man simply because their fantastic nature is not a product of human imagination but instead of some unintelligible predicaments; it is the residue of bygone functions. The danger of disorientation concealed in such phenomena is probably strong enough to incite the imagination to remarkable feats. Absurdity and fantasy, unless controlled by poetic imagination which uses them to defend a human orientation, are either treacherously depressing or provoke poetic inspiration.

Those conditions have disappeared that allowed giants of Goethe's type – who might defend, for example, a totally false teaching about color with unremitting persistence – to acquire the feeling that they have outgrown the globe and that their ideas were conquering the universe. The aristocracy of the mind disappeared with feudal society. Two of the most outstanding tendencies of 19th-century art gave the problem of artistic creation an importance commensurate with that which would be later attached to it by other approaches: (1) the romantic motifs of landscapes, rich in shapes and colors, from which emanated a charming calm and a yearning for loveliness, and which the painter sold to the ever-swelling bourgeoisie; (2) the illusions of horror with which the dark romanticists, who had the opportunity to feel the moral and material weight of that affluence on themselves and on their surroundings, defended themselves. But it was not until much later that any attempt was made to solve the problem of artistic creation, particularly in theoretical terms. After the great hope for a symbiosis of the revolutionary forces of reconstruction in art and in society, disillusion had to set in for us to realize that artistic creation had the same signal function in social life as does a high fever in the human organism, and that consequently it is incapable of taking over any tasks which ensue from any organized effort whatsoever. All systems of the association of imaginative ideas, in so far as they can be considered authentic, are subjected to a signal function which is both provoked and provocative, through which the imagination claims its social significance.

> How mysterious is imagination, that Queen of the Faculties? It touches all the others; it rouses them and sends them into combat. […] It is both analysis and synthesis […] It decomposes all creation and with raw materials accumulated and in accordance with rules whose origins one cannot find save in the furthest depths of the soul, it creates a new world […] As it has created the world, […] it is proper that it should govern it.[10]

[10] Charles Baudelaire, "From *Salon of 1859*, III in Art in Paris: 1845–1862: Baudelaire's Reviews of Salons and Other Exhibitions," in Stephen Prickett and Simon Haines (eds.), *European Romanticism: A Reader* (London, New Delhi, New York, and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 91–93, here 91.

This new world of Baudelaire's imagination is nothing but the real world under a new interpretation brought about not by the anarchy of fantasy but by a mysterious and profound law, which has more or less obvious reasons for its ability to be transformative.

There are the *abstractionists*, worshippers of a disquieting Beauty. The beauty of nature has been decomposed into its original elements: color harmonizations, controlled disharmony, and equilibristics of form. These are the paths of the clouds along which one can disappear from reality into the materialized fragrances to which the art industry adapts itself so well that it can trap us in merciless luxury and unyielding expediency, which we have to use if we are to prove our identity in a future that has become the present. Even the adherents of miserablist aesthetics (neo-dada, pop-art), who organize shocking but hopelessly passive confrontations of incongruous elements, leave no doubt whatsoever that their jokes – in spite of all their brutality – demand a very keen sensibility in questions of taste. Unfortunately, we are not able to shake off our impotence as a snake sheds its skin. We do not hibernate, but live in what we create for ourselves. Somber reality is somber reality. We have to bear it in everything that we are, all on which we sleep, all we wish to change. We do not want to subordinate ourselves to it, but we know that it exists. We do not imitate it. And if we throw at it images of its own fossilization, these images correspond only to the amount of anger with which we try to tear down that which encircles us.

If we consider Camus's statement that the effect of absurdity depends on the use of exaggerated logic, then we must add that, in this instance, instead of exaggerated logic it depends rather upon very accurate logic applied in unusual places. This unconventional and anti-conventional logic often manages to illuminate reality with such an intensely bright light that we are suddenly capable of perceiving the precise and astonishing relations surrounding the most innocent stimulus, which leads – in the discharges of black humor – to a more profound orientation within that which is designed to drown the spirit.

> We shall be forced to admit, in fact, that everything creates and that the least object, to which no particular symbolic role is assigned, is able to represent anything. The mind is wonderfully prompt at grasping the most tenuous relation that can exist between two objects taken at random, and poets know that they can always, without fear of being mistaken, say of one thing that it is *like* the other; the only hierarchy that can be established among poets cannot even rest on anything other than the degree of freedom they have demonstrated on this point.[11]

[11] André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 108–109.

So writes Andre Breton in his *Communicating Vessels.*

> To compare two objects as far distant as possible one from the other or, by any other method, to confront them in a brusque and striking manner, remains the highest task to which poetry can ever aspire. Its [...] power should tend more and more to practice drawing out the concrete unity of the two terms placed in relation and to communicate to each of them, whatever it may be, a vigor that it lacked as long as it was considered in isolation. What must be undone is the formal opposition of these two terms [...]. The stronger the element of immediate unlikeness appears, the more strongly it should be surmounted and denied. [...] So two different bodies, rubbed one against the other, attain through that spark their supreme unity in fire [...].[12]

What Breton describes here is the formative process of a metamorphosis, the origin of a poetic image. He implies that the motive force of this creative process, of this change in values, is the mechanism of unconscious mental sources. If this poetic image is to become an effective act of communication, however, if it is to be at all communicable, then potentially it cannot do without symbolic functions; it is not only an image but also a semiosis contained within this image. However, this would give rise to the rather monstrous assumption that symbols form a latent language of poetic images and that their communicative ability is based on some general linguistic convention between the poet and his public. We know that in reality – at least in powerful poetic situations – no such convention exists, and if in the course of time it forms as a secondary sediment it is in the very nature of these symbols to violate such convention. What then is a symbol if not an established sign of communication? Maybe it is just a momentary result of the dynamic symbolization process, a very distinct impulse in whose semantic formation participates the whole context that precedes and follows it. At best, the poet is too absorbed in and focused on the creation of the poem for the series of impulses evoked by the poem to be merely arbitrary or void of content. In this state of absorbed concentration, in this activated cause, in this necessity to provoke the imagination to take a certain course, conscious critical activity plays a significant role. That higher unity of fire, if it is really to kindle the flames, does not result from a clash of any two bodies – no matter how distant they may be from each other – if the poet is only playing with them, if they are not given power by what preceded them and what will follow them. Without signifying a return to apriori subject matter, it is necessary to grant an active role to the poet's critical consciousness in the creation of poetry, even if it be only

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 109–111.

with regard to those systems of the human mind to which the principles of dialectics and analogy apply.[13]

Whether we consider a metamorphosis in poetry to be a product of the unconscious forces of mental automatism, or whether we see in its formation an act of a more or less conscious revolt against the depressive features of life determinism, its resultant meaning is not a vague aesthetic pleasure or, more drastically, an imagined exoticism, but a communication directed towards the concretization of sensations and impressions; and this tendency to communicate cannot do without certain symbolizing meanings. However, for this symbolizing meaning, for this type of symbol, there exists no dictionary of fixed meanings which could be used to decipher a poem or painting:

> A symbolizing thing also contains, in itself, qualities other than those which characterize the symbolized meaning. The secret of symbolic works which defy conceptual rational interpretation, the inability to provide an accurate and complete answer to the question of what paintings of this type represent and mean, lies in the fact that a symbol is never entirely identical with its meaning. A symbolic picture always represents something more than the symbolized content, remaining at the same time also a direct, non-figurative denotation of the thing. In any case, doubts can arise about whether the shapes of the individual components and motifs of the pictures are to be considered as symbols or not.[14]

These special qualities, in which Teige sees the secret of symbolic works, defy rational explanation; however, their effect is not at all weakened by this. This secret can be a real secret only if it is not *hopelessly* unintelligible. This intelligibility, although it does not move within rational concepts, is inseparable from what Teige calls symbolized content. The secret of a symbolic picture is given by the dynamic and variable meaning of the symbols; this mobility and variability is partly evoked by the context, by the relation of one symbol to another and to the whole atmosphere of the picture, and partly by the relation of the whole work to reality, on which its individual interpretations are based. The title of the whole work can also play a special, suggestive role. The picture *An Old Man Beating an Old Dog* can be a mere description of an event which forms a part of the whole whose meaning – or to be more exact, whose communicated message – can be most varied. If, however, the context in which the picture is found directs our attention to an increased sensitivity to symbols, there can be no doubt that here we have

[13] Gérard Legrand, "Analogie et Dialectique," *La Brèche* (1964), no. 7, pp. 17–30.

[14] Karel Teige, in his preface to Toyen's cycle of paintings, published in *Střelnice* (Prague: František Borový, 1946), pp. 3–6, here 4–5. (Later republished as Karel Teige, "Střelnice," in Teige, *Osvobozování života a poezie*, pp. 87–98, here 92–93. – Editor's note.)

an idiotic foolishness of senility, as cruel as it is pathetic. The picture became a symbol only by the fact that it was granted a symbolic character by its semantic context. Also, interpretations in which a message is created whose bearer is a picture or a poem do not take the meaning of the symbol over from the work of art in a definitive state but supplement this suggested meaning or may even change it.[15]

A number of external factors apply here which may have only a very indirect and distant connection with the interpreted work, yet which nonetheless modify the meaning of the symbol and by consequence the message of the artistic expression itself. Even if it is evident that the fundamental expansion of the complexity of the symbol differs considerably from that conception of it that is characteristic for classical or romantic symbolism, it is difficult to give up this concept as long as we are dealing with the problems of the social or psychological effect of a work of art. We are still dealing with semiosis, yet a semiosis more and more marked by the newly acquired knowledge of the complexity of reality.

These symbolization dynamics modernize and change values in the evolution of art. Because of their static nature, conventional symbols lose their real symbolizing significance and become merely artistic ornaments. In this state they can become material in and of themselves for new and entirely different symbols: a poem, in its tendency toward spontaneous, living contact with reality, defends itself against the literary atmosphere by treating the conventional symbols in an ironic way (for example, the poetics of Karel Hynek).

Anything can become a symbol for a psychologically active observer. Any object or action can be discerned as symbolic if we are able to understand and develop the very subtle dialectic of the intellect and the imagination in the process of perceiving real connections or works of art. There is no symbolic meaning of things given once and for all. A real stack of wood can just as well become a symbol (for example, in the paintings of Mikuláš Medek), just as we may be unable to discern an intentional symbol in heraldry if we do not know its conventional interpretation. The symbolic character of things and actions is due to the latent or manifest needs of our changing states of

[15] In his book, *Sláva a bída divadel* [*The glory and misery of the theater*] (Prague: Družstevní práce, 1937), Jindřich Honzl mentions Stanislavsky's surprise when during a performance of Ibsen's *Stockman,* the crowd burst out in tumultuous protest. He says: "The crowd interpreted the words about a ragged coat like a sick man afflicted by interpretational lunacy" (*ibid.*, p. 55). He then adds: "There are concentrated in the audience suppressed complexes of revolt. It is not only the dramatic story and the idea of the play that are spoken from the stage; so too is everything which can find a connection with life's reality; Stockman's ragged coat is interpreted differently by Ibsen and Stanislavsky, and differently by the revolutionary psyche of the audience. However, the very obscurity of this image-reality lends great emotional force to it. The spectator's interest, imagination, and desire upsets the realistic description and takes the logic out of the meaning of people and things. They make *irrelevant facts*, rather than the action and the hero of the story, into the bearers of desire" (*ibid.*, pp. 56–57).

consciousness and of the impulses that consciousness can be given by a work of art. Whether we are the inspirers of symbols by creating poetry in the broadest sense of the word, or whether we are inspired by them as members of the public, who complete in our minds the formation of the symbolization impulses which are contained in artistic or real objects, in neither of these functions – which have a tendency to merge anyway – do these impulses have a generally or permanently valid meaning, for they only represent very conductive tensions into which even mutually contrastive symbolizing meanings can be introduced.

It is natural that in these states poetry is not something that can be connected to any general aesthetic order or agreed-upon values – things with which every authentic work of art is in permanent conflict. A perception which we have experienced as symbolic presupposes no given attitude to beauty, pleasure, or culture whatsoever. In this detaching yet simultaneously systematizing and consequently also objectivizing ability, in this ever recurring and newly conflicting appearance, in which poetry protects the most valuable core of human individuality and imagination, poetry can resist all monstrous mechanisms, even those which cybernetic laboratories cunningly promise to it.