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Lod' nemůže plout bez kormidelníka

(A ship cannot float without a helmsman)

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Peter Steiner (7 May 1946 – 26 November 2024) was an outstanding Czech-American Slavist, literary theorist, historian and translator. He was a Professor Emeritus of Slavic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and collaborated with various Czech and Slavic Studies departments worldwide, including in the Czech Republic and China. Although he lived abroad from the late 1960s, he never lost contact with the Czech milieu.

Steiner studied Czech, Russian and Aesthetics at Charles University in Prague from 1964 to 1968 but did not complete his studies. Following the events of 1968, he went into exile in Austria before eventually relocating to the United States. From 1970–1976, he was based at Yale University in New Haven, where he earned an MA and worked on his dissertation on Czech Structuralism and Russian Formalism. His research was supervised by Viktor Erlich and partially conducted in collaboration with the literary theorist and comparatist René Wellek. Steiner completed his doctorate in 1976 and later published a revised version of his dissertation under the title *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (1984).

From 1976 to 1977, Steiner was employed at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The following year, he taught Czech and Russian literature at Harvard University. In 1978 he joined the Department of Slavic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he taught for decades. He served as chair of the department during the periods 1990 to 1993, 2001 to 2002 and 2005 to 2006. In 1999, he was appointed Professor of Slavic Studies.

In his research activities, Steiner focused on literary theory, semiotics, the history of literary theory, and the histories of Czech and Russian literature. He devoted particular attention to the theoretical and historical examination of Herbartianism, Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism.

In terms of methodology, Steiner combined Structuralist – and, as he emphasised, Marxist – principles with a detailed critical, deconstructive reading of texts. He integrated this approach with semiotic analysis and political-historical contextual research.

Steiner's erudition was exceptional, and his scholarly works were characterized by an original authorial style that embraced play as a fundamental element. This play manifested in various forms, including concepts, interpretative procedures, paradoxes, contradictions, and, most notably, irony. However, irony was never the goal of this approach; rather, it served as a medium for acquiring knowledge. This approach enabled him to examine the objects and phenomena he studied from multiple perspectives, characterise them, and evaluate them. His ironic comments and remarks were intentionally provocative, as were some of his verbal pronouncements and slogans, which he used in both his written works and his everyday discussions.

Steiner's monographs, *Deserts of Bohemia: Czech Fiction and Its Social Context* (2000) and *Making a Czech Hero: Julius Fučík through His Writings* (2000), exemplify his wit and irony, as well as his

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interest in examining the relationship between Czech literature and politics or ideology. This thematic and interpretive focus is also evident in his 2022 collection of two extended essays on Václav Havel, titled *Václav Havel: Od existenciální revoluce k invazi do Iráku* (Václav Havel: From Existential Revolution to the Invasion of Iraq, 2022).

Steiner served as editor and co-editor of several significant literary-theoretical and semiotic publications, including *The Sign: Semiotics around the World* (with Richard W. Bailey and Ladislav Matějka, 1978), *The Structure of the Literary Process: Essays Dedicated to the Memory of Felix Vodička* (with Miroslav Červenka and Ronald Vroon, 1982), *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–1946* (1982).

Steiner engaged with the works of Czech Structuralists not only theoretically but also as a translator. Together with John Burbank, he translated and edited a two-volume collection of Jan Mukařovský's works: *Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský* (1977), *Structure, Sign, and Functions: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský* (1978). Additionally, he published an anthology on Prague Structuralism – *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–1946* (1982).

From the mid-1970s, Steiner frequently visited Czechoslovakia and maintained contact with both dissidents and representatives of official and unofficial Czech literary scholarship. He provided his friends with scholarly literature unavailable in Czechoslovakia at the time and helped them in publishing their scholarly works abroad.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Steiner organized a summer school of Slavic studies in Prague for his American students. In collaboration with the Center for Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania, he also arranged study and research opportunities in Philadelphia for Czech students. Additionally, he was an organizer and co-organizer of several international conferences.

In his later years, Steiner participated in various theoretical and historical projects at the Institute for Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences. In recognition of his contributions to philological and philosophical sciences, he was awarded the Josef Dobrovský Honorary Medal by the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic in 2021.

Peter Steiner was a renowned literary theorist, historian and Slavist whose translations of Czech literary scholars' work, along with his own groundbreaking studies, significantly enriched the global understanding of Czech literature and literary scholarship. Steiner passed away in Chengdu, China, after a brief illness.

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I had the privilege of knowing Peter Steiner for more than twenty years. We shared several common interests, which brought us together frequently at conferences in Prague, Brno, Moscow, Guangzhou, and beyond, as well as on other occasions. In the past five years, our contact became closer and more intensive, as Peter actively participated in the meetings and roundtables I organized as part of my projects on literary theory and resilient society.

Peter was always joking, ironic and provocative, with a phenomenal memory. He often used clever, ironic slogans and phrases in conversations and e-mails. One of his signature e-mail closings was the simple yet striking: Peace! (In Czech: Míru zdar!)

However, the very last e-mail I received from him was different. He sent it to me on the 9th of November last year. By then, he was already in China, in Guangzhou, preparing to travel to Chengdu. Instead of his usual closing, this time his e-mail ended on an entirely unexpected note, with a tone and sentiment unlike anything I had seen from him before. He wrote: "With comrades' greetings, a ship cannot float without a helmsman!" (In Czech: Se soudružským pozdravem, lod' nemůže plout bez kormidelníka!).

Where did this sentence come from so suddenly? I cannot say.

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And now, if I could, I would respond to him like this: Yes, you are right, Peter – a ship cannot float without a helmsman! Your ship is already floating in other worlds. And I send you my warmest greetings to that faraway land! Please give my best regards to our friends there!

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