ROMAN JAKOBSON

Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time

ПИКОВАЯ И ЧЕРВОННАЯ ДАМЫ

ОДНОВРЕМЕННОЕ ИЗОБРАЖЕНІЕ

Edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy

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With the assistance of Brent Vine

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Preface

Roman Jakobson—innovative explorer of the science of language, literary scholar, and semiotician—ranks among the seminal thinkers who shaped the "human sciences" in the twentieth century. Born in Moscow in 1896, Jakobson identified himself with the generation of great artists and writers born in the 1880s and 1890s, such as Picasso (1881–1973), Joyce (1882–1941), Braque (1882–1963), Stravinsky (1882–1971), Xlebnikov (1885–1922), Le Corbusier (1887–1965), and Majakovskij (1893–1930). The major influence of his youth was the pictorial and poetic experiments of the European avant-garde, especially Cubism, which radically posed the question of the relationship between the sign and reality, and between the material and intelligible parts of the sign (*signans* and *signatum*). In characterizing this generation, which reached maturity before the catastrophe of World War I and the cataclysms that ensued, and which managed to leave its creative mark upon twentieth-century thought, Jakobson stresses "the extraordinary capacity of these discoverers to overcome again and again the faded habits of their own yesterdays, together with an unprecedented gift for seizing and shaping anew every older tradition or foreign model without sacrificing the stamp of their own permanent individuality in the amazing polyphony of new creations."[1] This statement about his generation is at the same time an extremely apt self-characterization.

A poet himself (writing under the nom de plume Aljagrov), Jakobson was active in the Russian Futurist movement and was a friend of the leading artists and poets of the period between 1913 and 1919—Kazimir Malevič and Pavel Filonov, Velimir Xlebnikov and Vladimir Majakovskij. The bold experimentation in the arts, as exemplified especially in the work of the Cubo-Futurists, impressed upon Russian students of literature and language the need for a thorough revision of the basic tenets of both literary theory and linguistics, a revision necessitating the discarding of the old absolutes and an insistence on

[1] R. Jakobson, "Retrospect," in his *Selected Writings I: Phonological Studies* (The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1971, 2nd ed.), p. 632.

the dynamic view of art and reality. It is characteristic of the avant-garde approach that these problems were tackled in collective scientific work and discussion. As a first-year student at Moscow University, in 1915, Jakobson was a founding member and president of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and played an active part in its Petersburg counterpart, the "Society for the Study of Poetic Language" or OPOJAZ, as it is known by its Russian acronym. These two circles, which insisted upon the autonomy of literary studies and the immanent analysis of literary works, produced a revolution in the study of literature: their collective endeavors, which today go under the name of Russian Formalism, resulted in the reformulation of both the object of literary study and its methodology.[2]

After leaving Russia for Czechoslovakia in 1920, Jakobson, with Prince N. S. Trubetzkoy, elaborated the new discipline of phonology, the structural study of speech sounds. In 1926, with Vilém Mathesius and other prominent Czech and Russian scholars, he founded the Prague Linguistic Circle, the center of modern structural linguistics. After the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, Jakobson was forced to flee, via Scandinavia, to the United States, where he arrived in 1941. In New York, Jakobson taught first at the École Libre des Hautes Études, the Free French and Belgian university hosted by the New School for Social Research, where his colleagues included the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and the medievalist Henri Grégoire. Later, as a professor at Columbia (1945–1949), Harvard (1949–1965), and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1957–1982), Jakobson trained two generations of American linguists and Slavists, and was largely responsible for the growth of these disciplines in the United States.

An issue of the journal *Poetics Today,* edited by Benjamin Hrushovski and dedicated to Roman Jakobson on his eighty-fifth birthday, forms the core of this book.[3] Before his death in 1982, Jakobson elaborated the basic table of contents for the volume and provided the title—*Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*—which eloquently echoes the spirit of his scholarly work. In Jakobson's view, the literary work is first and foremost a linguistic fact, a special use of language that engages linguistic structure maximally, radically, and—it should be stressed—often unconsciously. Indeed, Jakobson's scholarly feat consists as much in enlivening linguistic science by confronting the creative use of language as in bringing to bear upon literary texts the precise methods of linguistics. As Roland Barthes astutely wrote: "Roman Jakobson has given us a marvelous gift: he has given linguistics to artists. It is he who has opened up the live and sensitive juncture between one of the most exact of the sciences of man and the creative world. He represents, both for his theoretical thought and his actual accomplishments, the meeting of scientific thought and the creative spirit."[4]

[2] See V. Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1981, 3rd ed.).
[3] *Roman Jakobson: Language and Literature* = *Poetics Today,* vol. 2, no. 1a (Autumn 1980).
[4] R. Barthes, "Avant-Propos," *Cahiers CISTRE,* vol. 5 (Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'Homme, 1978), p. 9.

Moreover, in keeping with his belief in the necessity of a global approach to language, poetry, and the arts, Jakobson views the literary work as a semiotic phenomenon, one that must be examined within the context of the entire universe of signs. Finally, the dynamism of verbal art and of language in general is a cardinal point of his theory: time is viewed as a constitutive, rather than extraneous, factor in language and literature, one that produces momentum and change./

In the introductory article included here, "My Favorite Topics," Jakobson presents in lapidary fashion the diversity of his interests and achievements, marks the path of their development, and, characteristically, outlines further tasks and possibilities for the science of language. Originally presented at the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome in 1980, on the occasion of his receiving the Antonio Feltrinelli Prize for Linguistics and Philology, the article points to "invariance in the midst of variation" as the leitmotif unifying the author's work in such diverse domains as phonology, versification, grammar of poetry, language acquisition and loss, the Slavic oral tradition, and semiotics. As becomes clear from reading this article, what is remarkable about Jakobson's work is its essential unity despite the variations in topics he addressed, the vicissitudes of his actual biography, and the enormous volume and temporal span of his scholarly output. One theme he particularly singles out, the role of time and space in language and society, is the subject of the first section of the present book.

All his life Jakobson remained a man of the avant-garde, and his emphasis on the dynamic role of time reflects that legacy. As he says in the opening "Dialogue on Time in Language and Literature," Futurism, with the theory of relativity, exercised a profound influence on his ideas about time and space as factors intrinsic to language. They prompted him to challenge the formulation of this problem given in Ferdinand de Saussure's classic *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). According to Saussure, language as a system (synchrony) is opposed to its historical development (diachrony) as static versus dynamic moments. In Jakobson's view such an opposition is false, since it excludes the role of time in the present moment of language and thus creates an erroneous disruption between the past and the present in linguistic processes. Although the article included here reassessing Saussure's doctrine, "Sign and System of Language," was originally published in 1959, it is the fruit and continuation of ideas Jakobson introduced as early as 1929, in his pathbreaking monograph on the evolution of the Russian phonological system, *Remarques sur l'évolution du russe comparée à celle des autres langues slaves.*[5] The application of the principle of dynamics to literary studies is advocated in "Problems in the Study of Language and Literature" on which Jakobson collaborated in 1929 with Jurij Tynjanov, one of the most brilliant members of OPOJAZ. Written at a time when Russian Formalism was coming under increasing attack in the Soviet Union for its supposed "ahistoricism," this manifesto anticipates the structural

[5] See *Selected Writings I,* pp. 7–116.

approach to literary history which evolved in the 1930s in the Prague Linguistic Circle. The entire section on time dispels the tenacious belief that Structuralism has ignored the historical dimension in favor of synchronic analysis; on the contrary, as Jakobson's work shows, the problem is one of integrating the two dimensions in their interaction.

The central part of this book is devoted to one of Roman Jakobson's major contributions to poetics, his theory of "grammar of poetry." In his celebrated essay of 1960, "Linguistics and Poetics," Jakobson postulates that in poetry "equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence."[6] As the etymology of the word suggests, verse consists of recurrent returns. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the basic principle underlying any system of versification, which Jakobson qualifies as "the superinducing of the equivalence principle upon the word sequence or, in other terms, the *mounting* of the metrical form upon the usual speech form."[7] In one of his earliest works, *On Czech Verse—Primarily in Juxtaposition with Russian* (1923),[8] Jakobson demonstrates, using the methods of phonology, how the different prosodic features of the Slavic languages affect the type of versification systems that evolved historically in those languages. In going from metrics, where one deals with recurrence of equivalent units of sound, to grammar, Jakobson establishes yet another level at which the interrelationship of linguistic material and poetic form should be studied.

The core of Jakobson's theory is presented with examples from several languages in the opening essay of the second section of the present book, the English abstract of his longer Russian paper "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry."[9] Grammatical categories, which are purely relational and obligatory in everyday speech, become, in poetry, wide-ranging expressive devices. In other words, in poetry such abstract language "fictions," to use Jeremy Bentham's term, become reified and take on a life of their own. Grammar is a particularly semioticized part of language, one constantly experienced in our everyday mythology in such basic aspects as gender, for example. It becomes even more highly charged in the context of poetry: as Jakobson writes, "*in fiction,* in verbal art, *linguistic fictions* are fully realized."[10]

The results of Jakobson's investigation into the role of grammar in poetry are contained in the third volume of his *Selected Writings,* a work of more than 800 pages.[11] Included there are Jakobson's theoretical articles on the subject as well as thirty-four analyses of poems ranging in period from the eighth to the twentieth century and representing the most diverse cultural, aesthetic, and

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[6] R. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in his *Selected Writings III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague-Paris-New York: Mouton, 1981), p. 27.

[7] *Ibid.,* p. 37.

[8] See *Selected Writings V: On Verse, Its Masters and Explorers* (The Hague-Paris-New York: Mouton, 1979), pp. 3–130.

[9] The Russian version was first delivered as a lecture at the International Conference on Poetics, Warsaw, 1960; it is reprinted in *Selected Writings III,* pp. 63–86.

[10] See below, p. 39.

[11] See footnote 6 above.

linguistic environments. Jakobson has clearly succeeded in proving that the creative exploitation and patterning of grammatical categories are poetic universals. In certain poems, styles, or periods, they may in fact become the dominant poetic device. The section on grammar of poetry in the present volume contains some of Jakobson's most accessible and persuasive analyses. The Russian nineteenth-century poet Aleksandr Puškin wrote entire poems devoid of the usual poetic tropes and figures but structured on the skillful use of grammatical tropes. A classic example is his "Ja vas ljubil . . ." ("I loved you . . ."), the most famous short lyric poem in the Russian language. Jakobson's analysis, which shows beyond any doubt the full poetic efficacy of grammar, is published here in its first English translation. This example is, of course, a rarity; far more usual are poems in which imagery, tropes, and figures are intertwined with grammatical figures in a complex network of equivalences and contrasts. Such a play on the literal and metaphorical, the concrete and abstract, is elegantly analyzed in the same study on the basis of another of Puškin's poems, "Čto v imeni tebe moem . . ." ("What is in my name for you . . .").

Both "Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry" and "On Poetic Intentions and Linguistic Devices in Poetry" address a question that is often asked by readers confronted with the astounding poetic ordering of linguistic materials that structural analysis reveals: are these consciously applied devices? Do they reflect the author's intention? Some critics of Jakobson's theory go so far as to argue that if such devices are not intentional, not part of a conscious poetic "code" shared by poet and audience, then they cannot be considered as poetic devices properly speaking. Jakobson's reply is that while some poets may be highly conscious of such devices, this need not be the case at all. If one examines oral literature, one finds the same striking structural regularities that characterize the written tradition, while the "tellers of tales" are as a rule totally ignorant of the structural code they so assiduously follow. Indeed, much of the evocative power of oral and written poetry is due precisely to the fact that its patterns are perceived subliminally. It remains for the analyst to pinpoint the concrete linguistic patterns that the poet has created; if some of them prove to be below the threshold of individual readers' perceptions, it hardly means that they do not exist or fail to have an effect on readers.

The study concluding the section on grammar of poetry, "Yeats' 'Sorrow of Love' through the Years," written in collaboration with Stephen Rudy, is in many respects a paradigmatic Jakobsonian analysis. It demonstrates how all levels of language—phonology, grammar, lexicon, and syntax—are exploited in the creation of poetic structure and meaning. It is unique among Jakobson's studies, however, in addressing the diachronic problem of structural change across time, thus complementing the articles in the first section of this book. Yeats' later reworkings of his poems have been a subject of controversy in literary studies, with some critics even charging that he spoiled his early poems by rewriting them. In the case in point, the reworking was so radical that Yeats retained only a few words. An objective and painstaking analysis discloses,

however, the futility of applying such arbitrary judgments to Yeats' work: the two poems share certain structural features at the same time that they reveal essentially different principles of organization reflecting the changes in Yeats' poetics. Jakobson's concern here is hardly a question of textology in the traditional sense of the term. The problem of variation emerges in a double aspect: what is rejected by a poet at a later stage of development cannot be viewed judgmentally; moreover, the poet's workshop, his creative experimentation, is as important for establishing the invariance characterizing his work as are the canonic versions of his poems. This study also contains one of Jakobson's most interesting analyses of the role of "sound symbolism" in poetry, a realm in which Yeats was the consummate master.

The third section of this book, "Poetry and Life," demonstrates Jakobson's versatility as a literary scholar. Many of his critics have accused Jakobson of trying to "reduce" poetry to parallelisms in sound and grammar. On the contrary, as an attentive reading of his work shows, the wider questions that traditionally occupy the student of literature are ones Jakobson also addressed. Although he disliked the term "literary critic," Jakobson possessed one of the finest critical intelligences that has been brought to bear on problems of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and especially of Russian poetry. In 1930, when Vladimir Majakovskij took his own life, Roman Jakobson responded to this tragic event with an article under the symptomatic title "On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets." Contemporaries rightly considered this impassioned piece of literary criticism one of the best articles he had written: Osip Mandel'štam, for example, is said to have called it "a thing of biblical power." On the one hand, this essay is, as Jakobson's writes in "My Favorite Topics," "a wide adoption of the invariance test": its central concern is to isolate the invariant thematic core of Majakovskij's poetry. On the other hand, Majakovskij's act, which Jakobson considered symbolic for the entire generation, turned his thoughts toward the problem of "poetic myth," i.e., the particular link between a writer's life and work. The article on Majakovskij was followed by four studies in a similar vein: "What Is Poetry?" (1933–1934), "Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak" (1933), "Notes on Erben's Work" (1935), and "The Statue in Puškin's Poetic Mythology" (1937).[12] All five works are linked by the same idea: in the life of a poet the border line between the "hard facts" of biography and the symbolic expression of poetry becomes obliterated, and the traditional division between "Dichtung und Wahrheit" proves to be invalid. Summarizing his ideas from that epoch half a century later, Jakobson said: "In these circumstances the question of our loss and the lost poet forced itself upon us. Majakovskij had more than once stated that for him, the poet's realism did not consist in picking up the crumbs of the past, nor in reflecting the present, but rather in creatively anticipating the future. And we

[12] See R. Jakobson, "What Is Poetry?" *Selected Writings III*, pp. 740–750; "Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak," in *Pasternak: Modern Judgments,* ed. D. Davie and A. Livingstone (Glasgow, 1969), pp. 131–151; "Poznámky k dílu Erbenovu," *Selected Writings V*, pp. 510–537; "The Statue in Puškin's Poetic Mythology," *Selected Writings V*, pp. 237–280.

did indeed discover that the poet had recounted his destiny in advance, had foreseen his fateful end, and had even precisely guessed and described all the absurd and unpitying reactions of his contemporaries to his 'unexpected,' but timely, death. . . . Throughout the course of his poems, Majakovskij had sketched out the monolithic myth of the poet, a zealot in the name of the revolution of the spirit, a martyr condemned to cruel and hostile incomprehension and rejection. . . . When this myth entered the sphere of life, it became impossible to trace a limit between the poetic mythology and the curriculum vitae of the author without committing terrible forgeries."[13]

"The Language of Schizophrenia: Hölderlin's Speech and Poetry" is a selection from a monograph written in collaboration with Grete Lübbe-Grothues, entitled "Ein Blick auf *Die Aussicht* von Hölderlin." It deals with the effect of the poet's madness on his work, in particular a late lyric entitled "The View." One constant concern of Jakobson's work in poetics was his battle against what he termed "aesthetic egocentrism." In his analyses of medieval poetry, of so-called primitives (Blake, Rousseau, Janko Král'), and of the oral tradition, Jakobson has revealed poetic swans where earlier critics, biased by their own aesthetic orientation, saw only "ugly ducklings." Hölderlin's poem is a vivid case in point. Rather than analyzing the poet's late verse objectively, previous critics had labeled it the incoherent ravings of a madman. Jakobson's meticulous structural analysis of "The View" discloses its aesthetic merits and will doubtless spark a critical revision of the poet's work. The selection published here, however, concentrates more on the theoretical conclusions to be drawn from the actual analysis of the verse of a madman. The language of schizophrenia is revealed to be not an aberration but a linguistic system in which the capacity for dialogue is lost. The monologic orientation led, in Hölderlin's case, to bizarre everyday speech behavior and a radical shift in his poetic style, both of which cease to be mysterious when analyzed from a linguistic point of view.

The present volume concludes with three essays that provide a perspective on Jakobson's work as a whole. Theoretically minded readers may wish to turn to them first, before sampling Jakobson's own works published here. Linda Waugh, who collaborated with Jakobson on his crowning work on phonology, *The Sound Shape of Language,*[14] has contributed a fine study tracing the ways in which Jakobson's theory of poetics grows out of and is organically bound to his general theory of language. In an essay of particular interest to students of literature, Krystyna Pomorska shows how Jakobson's theory of poetics and analytical method can be applied to prose. Finally, Igor Mel'čuk analyzes Jakobson's work in morphology and in the process draws wider conclusions about Jakobson's contribution to humanistic scholarship in general.

The author of over 600 books and articles, of which more than half are

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[13] R. Jakobson and K. Pomorska, *Dialogues* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1982), pp. 138–139.
[14] R. Jakobson and L. Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language* (Bloomington-London: Indiana University Press, 1979).

included in the seven monumental volumes of his *Selected Writings*,[15] Jakobson can hardly be represented adequately by a single volume. Nevertheless, the present book, one of the last he himself planned and worked on, may be regarded as a fitting introduction to certain of his linguistic theories and especially to his pathbreaking work in poetics. Several of the articles included here are obligatory reading for anyone interested in poetics or in the history of twentieth-century literary criticism, but they have not been available previously in a convenient edition addressed to the wider reading public.

<div align="right">Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy</div>

[15] Volumes I, III, and V are referred to in footnotes 1, 6, and 8 above. The other volumes of the *Selected Writings* are *II: Word and Language* (1971); *IV: Slavic Epic Studies* (1966); *VI: Early Slavic Paths and Crossroads* (1984); and *VII: Contributions to Comparative Mythology. Studies in Linguistics and Philology, 1972-1982* (1985). For a complete listing of Jakobson's works see *A Complete Bibliography of Roman Jakobson's Writings, 1912–1982,* compiled and edited by S. Rudy (Berlin-Amsterdam-New York: Mouton, 1984).

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My Favorite Topics

Roman Jakobson

The question of invariance in the midst of variation has been the dominant topic and methodological device underlying my diversified yet homogeneous research work since my undergraduate attempt of 1911 to outline the formal properties of the earliest Russian iambs. The interplay of invariance and variation continued to attract my attention ever more insistently. Versification, with its diaphanous dichotomies of downbeat—upbeat, break—bridge, and with its correlation of two fundamental metrical concepts, namely design and instance, offered the self-evident possibility of determining the relational invariance that the verse retains across its fluctuations, and of defining and interpreting the scale of the latter.

A monograph of 1923, *On Czech Verse, Primarily in Comparison with Russian* (in Russian), which was later included, together with a few subsequent papers on metrics, in my *Selected Writings* (henceforth abbreviated as *SW*), (*V*/1979:3-223, 570-601), initiated a long and detailed discussion about the relationship between poetic forms and language. This investigation required a careful delineation of the diverse functions assigned by a given language to its prosodic elements, a delineation that plays a substantial role in the relative application of those elements in the corresponding system of versification.

The continued inquiry into this problem, which ties together metrics and linguistics, impelled me to elucidate and exemplify such essentially topological questions as, for instance, the invariants retained and the variations experienced throughout the diverse works of one and the same poet or of different poets within the same literary school, as well as the question of the metrical cleavage between single literary genres. The transformation undergone by certain verse types all along the history of a given poetic language called for

the same kind of treatment. I used chiefly Slavic, especially Czech, verse types as experimental material (see *SW VI*/1984: *Early Slavic Paths and Crossroads*).

The convergent and divergent metrical rules in a set of similar languages, whether cognate or remote, brought me within the reach of comparative metrics in its two aspects, the historical and the typological. By collating the oral traditions of the different Slavic peoples, I ventured to uncover the rudiments of Proto-Slavic versification (*Oxford Slavonic Papers III*/1952, pp. 21–66, republished in *Selected Writings IV*/1966: 414–463), thereby contributing to Meillet's search for Indo-European verse. Concurrently, advances in metrical typology led me to an ever more detailed extraction of invariants and thus towards a closer insight into metrical universals, as was emphasized in my study "Linguistics and Poetics" (*SW III*/1981). An examination of distant metrical phenomena, such as Germanic alliteration, the admissive rules of Mordvinian meters, or the modular design of Chinese regulated verse, enhanced my search for the universal foundations of versification (see *SW V*/1979: *On Verse, Its Masters and Explorers*).

It was the difference between the two classes of prosodic elements, the sense-discriminative function on the one hand, and the delimitative one on the other, that naturally became a topic of discussion in my metrical monograph of 1923, along with the simultaneous application of the same functional approach to the entire sound pattern of language. The book in question proposed the name "phonology" for the study of speech sounds with regard to meaning and asserted the strictly relational character of the sense-discriminative entities, linked to each other by binary oppositions as components of the ever-hierarchical phonological systems. Since my first steps in phonology I have been continuously attracted to the search for the ultimate constituents of language and the powerful structural laws of the network they comprise. I endeavored to trace the allusions to the existence of such ultimate entities in the wisdom of antiquity and the emergence one century ago of the concept "phoneme" in the perspicacious works of a few bold linguistic pioneers (see "Toward a Nomothetic Science of Language," *SW II*/1971:369–602).

The breaking-down of the phoneme into "distinctive features" as the actually ultimate components of the phonological system suggested itself and was achieved toward the end of the 1930s (cf. *Phonological Studies, SW I*/1962: 221–233, 272–316, 418–434, and *Six leçons sur le son et le sens,* (1976). This task demanded a rigorous insight into the common denominator of multiple variables; the notion of contextual variants gradually became more pertinent and more precisely elaborated, and the consistent segmentation of speech proved to be feasible (cf. Jakobson & Linda Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language,* 1979).

The structure of phonological systems is of great linguistic interest; the typological comparison of such systems reveals significant underlying laws and prompts the final conclusion that "the sound patterns of single languages are varying implementations of universal invariants" (Jakobson & Waugh 1979: