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**I. DÍLO ROMANA JAKOBSONA  
— METODOLOGIE — TEORIE**



## INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

### ROMAN JAKOBSON AND THE CZECH POETISTS LANGUAGE IS NOT A PRISON HOUSE

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#### 1. *Jakobson and the nature of language*

In the 1920s and 1930s Jakobson and the Prague Linguistic Circle revolutionized the traditional study of language; and after Jakobson came to the United States, he continued his astounding inventiveness; and his happy discovery of Peirce's semiotics led him to even broader vistas. For Jakobson language was a liberating force, hardly a prison house as it is for Frederick Jameson who misunderstood Jakobson and the Prague school, as did so many in the West who have equated structuralism only with Saussure. On the contrary, for Jakobson language was the means for all humans to creatively construct and invent meanings and thereby to express and communicate the most ambiguous and subtle thoughts.

Jakobson was a true polyglot, albeit with a Russian accent. He was fond of saying that he spoke Russian in twenty languages; and the fate of polyglots like him, he said, was similar to that of people who live only in hotels and never have a home of their own. The literatures about which he wrote encompassed the entire globe, English, Russian, Polish, Portuguese, German, Italian, Serbian, Croatian–Dalmatian, French, Polish, Bulgarian, Slovene, Romanian, and Greek poets were foils for Jakobson's analytical mind. And while he wrote mostly about poetry, he did not neglect the visual, dramatic, filmic, and oral dimensions of art.

I would like to preface my remarks with a few personal reminiscences about Jakobson. Jakobson's first regular teaching position in the United States was at Columbia University immediately after the war. During that time, I was his student. We shared a deep interest in Czech culture, and from the first day we met we frequently discussed all things Czech, especially Czech literature, and we always spoke Czech with each other. Jakobson was oblivious to the usual professorial rituals; his relations to his students were those of equality. He used to say that, since he was childless, his students

replaced his children for him; he was always available to them, and never did he invoke an atmosphere of bureaucratism. His office and his small apartment in New York were always open to his students. Jakobson was simply totally disinterested in academic protocol and parochial administrative matters. For example, I remember the following event which well expresses his less than enthusiastic interest in the routine of examinations. The Department of Slavic Languages at Columbia had just mandated that regular examinations were to be held at the end of each graduate course. It was, I believe, in the year 1946, the first time that Jakobson was teaching his famous course in Slavic morphology. The class had an enrolment of at least forty students. During the penultimate meeting of the course, Jakobson announced that the new regulation forced him to examine us, and said with a roguish grin that he would use the first hour and forty-five minutes of the two-hour class to lecture as usual, and would devote the last fifteen minutes to examine each student orally, leaving thus less than 30 seconds for each student's examination. The questions clearly showed Jakobson's disdain for the new rule. When it came to me, he asked me: "Can you name one West Slavic language?" When I answered: "Czech," his response was a smiling "excellent, you have an A" (the best grade). Questions addressed to other students were of a similar nature, but I do not remember them.

Jakobson and I were neighbors not only in Cambridge, but also in Vermont where both of us retreated for the summer. Frequent visits to each others' houses were occasions for long and amusing conversations. His fund of fascinating stories seemed inexhaustible. A few years ago, many years after Jakobson's death, my Japanese friend and colleague Professor Kei-ichi Yamanaka sent me a tape of a lecture which Jakobson had delivered in Tokyo in 1967 and which, to my knowledge, has never been published. We received the tape during the summer in Vermont. There, in our living room in which Jakobson had so often held forth, Jakobson came alive. His voice, with all its peculiar enthusiastic and emphatic inflections so well known to us, and his humor and enthusiasm were all conveyed. The lecture itself was a resumé of Jakobson's views on language in the context of other domains, and particularly in the framework of culture. Here is one of Jakobson's anecdotes from this lecture which dramatized his belief in cross-linguistic communication and understanding:

A group of Norwegian and Russian fishermen had worked together for decades or perhaps even centuries in their jobs in the fishing waters above the Arctic Circle, and had elaborated a common language, a kind of Russo-Norwegian pidginized system. And the Russians thought that they were speaking Norwegian, and the Norwegians thought they were speaking Russian, and they called the language *moja po tvoja* which means in the Scandi-

navianized Russian which they seemed to have been actually speaking, “*mine, I think it might be yours*”.

The Tokyo lecture continues to develop these implications, now on a theoretical level:

You see, some forty years ago when there was the third international congress of linguists, we were in a fight for the autonomy of linguistics, for the elaboration of its own peculiar and specific methods and devices. And it was a very important problem: to know where are the boundaries of linguistics; where (are the problems to which) only linguistics can really give an answer? (But) now, we are approaching the 10th Congress of Linguists, we stand before a completely different problem. It is no longer the problem of autonomy, it is the problem of integration. It is the problem of interdisciplinary relations, the problem of relations between various disciplines. It is the problem of an integration into a common domain in style, style of life, style of mankind. Of course integration implies autonomy...but (it) excludes isolationism....Because isolationism in our cultural life...is harmful. But there is no real integration without autonomy, which understands the necessity of the internal laws, the intrinsic laws, of every field and every discipline. The other enemy of these two wonderful ideas of autonomy and integration, the other enemy besides isolationism, is heteronomy, or if you permit me to translate this a little bit technical term into a term which is from the newspapers, it is colonialism. Thus: autonomy and integration – perfect; isolation and colonialism – harmful. (Jakobson 1967).

Heteronomy, in its etymological meaning is the opposite to autonomy. Thus a heteronomous system is one reduced to the laws of another system. Here Jakobson reiterates the notions which he had developed earlier with Mukařovský and other members of the Prague Circle in the 1920s and 1930s, namely those of autonomy and integration, as opposed to the immanence of structures that had been promoted by the Russian formalists. For the Prague school, structures, while governed by their own internal laws (Mukařovský used the Hegelian term of *Selbstbewegung* [Czech *samopohyb*]), were never closed systems, but open to impulses from other systems.

## 2. Poetry as a weapon in the fight against the prison house

Jakobson's attraction to poetic forms of language emerged early in his life. As a young Russian futurist poet, he wrote quite outrageous *zaum* poetry under the *nom de plume* of Aljagrov (cf. Winner 1972, 1993). Let us look at a few lines of Jakobson–Aljagrov's verse:

uduša janki arkan

kankan armjank  
 dušajanki kitajanki  
 k'it y tak i n'ikaja...(Jakobson 1914).

Its nonsense words are not entirely devoid of meaning, for they have evocative connotations in Russian, but the dream of the *zaum* poets to achieve a universal communication in this way remained an unsuccessful but interesting experiment.

Not only did Jakobson have a natural faculty for the verbal arts and its relation to nonverbal forms, but this gift was nurtured by the heady atmosphere of the Russian avantgarde arts, visual and verbal, that flourished all too briefly in Russia before and shortly after the bolshevik revolution. All these movements, such as futurism, Malevič's minimalism, and nascent cubism, were impelled by a utopian faith in the transformatory power of art, its "life-building" ability, its *žiznestroenie*, to use the futurist term then current in Russia. Futurist art was to bring about a rapprochement of high art, popular culture, and radical politics (for a recent discussion of this, cf. Cavanagh 1993). The Russian term *žiznestroenie* or *žiznetvorčestvo* (lit. life-building, life-creating) means that art was to penetrate all life; and indeed, there occurred a remarkable, though short-lived, rapprochement between avantgarde aesthetics, radical politics, and popular culture (cf. Perloff 1986:xvii).

Jakobson was fond of joking that Russian was his wife but Czech his mistress. Czech literature was, indeed, his true love; for in Czech literature the experiments of the Russian avantgarde continued long after they were harshly silenced in the Soviet Union. So Jakobson's enthusiasm turned to the literature of Czechoslovakia, encompassing its history from the Middle Ages, the Slovak poetry of Janko Král, the Czech Romantics of the nineteenth century, especially Mácha, the avantgarde literature of his time, and also the general theoretical considerations of the specificities of Czech verse. His identification with, and knowledge of, the literature of Czechoslovakia was profound. Witness his first teaching appointment, now sixty years ago, at the Masaryk University here in Brno as Professor of medieval Czech literature.

### *Jakobson and the Czech avantgarde: poetism*

What interested Jakobson most was the flourishing Czech avantgarde of the 1920s and 1930s, primarily its poetry but also its other manifestations, such as prose, theater and film, especially the quintessentially Czech movement of poetism which to this day is little known outside the territory of the former Czechoslovak Republic, to which we shall return in a moment.

The rich avantgarde movement that flourished in Czechoslovakia in the interwar years was marked by two interacting and not unrelated streams, poetism, typically and essentially exclusively Czech but in important ideological respects related to the visionary aspects of Russian futurism, and the somewhat later surrealism, more directly rooted in the European mainstream and particularly related to currents in France. Poetism was dominant during the 1920s. By 1934, when the *surrealistická skupina* was formed, its main actors turned to surrealism. Karel Teige (1900–1951) was the inspirational ideological choreographer of both groups.

The spirit of poetism, though essentially original, took some inspiration from Russian futurism, and also from its French antecedent, the experimental poetry of Apollinaire which abolished punctuation, introduced visual poems (*calligrammes*) and played with word games. The title of one of Apollinaire's works (*La zone*) became the title of a poetist journal published in Brno, *Pásmo*.

In many conversations with me, Jakobson stressed his affinities with the poetist movement, and his warm feelings for its adherents, especially for the poet Vítězslav Nezval. He frequently recounted to me the story of his first meeting with Nezval in a Prague coffee house at the time when he was preparing the Czech version of his study on the specificity of Czech verse (Jakobson 1926) and was interviewing Czech poets regarding the urgent question of the accentual system of Czech verse argued by those who advocated a stress-based system (*přizvučníci*) as opposed to those who championed a quantity-based system (*časomírníci*). In his memoirs, (Nezval 1959) Nezval recalls his impressions when in a small coffee house a strange-looking "being" approached him, introduced himself as Roman Jakobson and began to question him intensely about his view on stress and quantity in Czech verse. This event was followed by years of intimate friendship. Nezval dedicated his collection of verse, *The Return Ticket (Zpáteční lístek)* (Nezval 1933) to Jakobson; and in the poem, entitled "Letter to Jakobson", contained in this collection, Nezval portrays his poetistic credo, stressing coincidence, the use of everyday phrases combined in a collage-like manner, and ends by thanking Jakobson for being the inspiration for all this:

...Chci tvořit básně z dokumentů

Kolik jich je v tomtom obchodu  
Cele se vzdáti náhodě  
Brát jenom co spadne samo  
Váš rozhovor je báseň, dámo  
Dnes vyzpovídám jeptišku  
Směs novinových výstřžků  
Chansony promícháme s daty

I want to create poems from documents

How many are there in this shop  
To give myself totally to chance  
To take only what falls by itself  
Your conversation, lady, is a poem  
Today I will confess a nun  
A mixture of newspaper clippings  
We mix cabaret songs with dates



Podivuhodné inzeráty  
Zapiš co volá kamelot

Nůžky a malou tubu klišu  
dnes básník montuje svou knihu  
Změnil se vskutku v děčko?  
Romane, díky za všechno!

Amazing advertisements  
Write down what the newspaper vendor shouts....  
Scissors and a small tube of glue  
Today's poet assembles his poem  
Has he really turned into a child?  
Roman, thanks for everything!

In his memoirs, Nezval praises Jakobson's defense of the new poets against reactionaries in art, as Jakobson did in his 1925 essay "The End of Poetic Applied Art and Poetic Commercialism" (1925) in which he expressed his admiration for the poetists' autonomous use of language, and calls them "the courageous innovators [who]...have taken the road of a conscious elaboration of poetic language."

Among Jakobson's admirers was also the poetist prose writer Vladislav Vančura (1891–1942) who was executed by the Germans. One chapter of the memoirs of Vančura's widow (1967) is devoted to Vančura's friendship with Jakobson and other members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, especially Mukařovský, Havránek and Bogatyrev. She writes:

This friendship, especially in the case of Jakobson and Mukařovský, extended also to their families. Roman Jakobson, Russian by origin, was one of the most gifted Slavists and Bohemists, an unusual man, both in appearance and in nature. A powerful man, with a rather large head, thick blond hair, and the face of a Roman god, he squinted in one eye. But he was not one to be bothered by such a troublesome defect. He overflowed with vitality, spoke with passion and gestured with spirit....Vladislav felt happy among such friends – he was drawn to Jakobson's ardor and élan, and he loved the debates with Mukařovský who never lost his academic demeanor (Vančurová 1967).

The poetists were grouped in an association facetiously called *Devětsil*. Jakobson was a member almost from the beginning. For Karel Teige the aim of *Devětsil* was the transformation of art into an art of living. Art was not to be politically engaged, but rather it was to refresh the human spirit and return society to the joy of the holiday spirit. For Teige, artistic and social acts, although they refer to different spheres of life, were of equal value and importance. Hence Teige saw the germs of the real freedom of modern art in the circus, the vaudeville and the cabaret. The new art was an eccentric carnival, a syncretic art involving all five senses where verse was free of morals and ideology, and unfettered by rules. Like Apollinaire's *orphisme*, it must overcome the autonomy of genres (cf. Teige 1928). It must dethrone the Kantian separation and independence of the aesthetic sphere. The new art, like the

Greek *poiesis*, was to be, as Teige put it, "an integral, supreme, life-giving creativity...a great poetic faith in the universality of poetry". It must unite artifact and object, conscious staging and spontaneous excitement (Teige 1930). Teige's artistic functionalism, during his early stage of intellectual development, was an expression of this romantic position. In an article written in 1925, entitled "Constructivism and the Liquidation of 'Art'", (Teige 1925), Teige denied the existence of absolute values in art, such as beauty, etc. The Czech word for art, *umění*, he reminds his readers, is derived from the verb *uměti* to know how to do something, like the German *können* or the French *savoir* (in the sense of *umím anglicky*, I know English, *umím řídit*, I know how to drive); and thus "art" has no special cultural niche such as the creation of beauty. The Czech language, Teige wrote, enables us to speak of the art of medicine, the art of photography, etc., doing away forever with the concept of art with a capital A, "les beaux arts, ars academica...has been dethroned by modern times....According to the Larousse dictionary, art is the application of knowledge to the realization of a certain goal" (130). Elsewhere Teige writes that "the form (of a work of art) must be worked out in the sense of its *function*,...i.e. not for rational comprehension but for maximal emotivity (Teige 1928:325). This optimistic poetic vision assumes that all individuals are equally capable creators and consumers of art. It echoed the faith in the romantic goals of the last stage of communism which was to create a new type of human, free of drudgery and blessed with leisure to indulge in artistic pursuits. Thus, just as they were in early Soviet Russia, questions about the boundaries of art and the relation of art to life were raised; and the work of the traditional artist was seen as indistinguishable from that of the worker, the peasant, the artisan, etc. (cf. Chvatík and Pešat 1967:364).

Throughout his lifetime Jakobson reiterated his admiration for the poetists' autonomous use of language. As Jakobson put it considering the experiments of the poetists, in one of his most important programmatic articles of his Czech sojourn (Jakobson 1933– 34:750), it is of utmost importance to feel the word as a word and not as a mere representation of an object; the word must be felt as having a weight of its own (cf. the Russian futurists' *samovitoe slovo*, or *slovo kak takovoe*). It is important that besides the direct awareness of the identity between sign and object (A is A1), there is a necessity for the direct awareness of the inadequacy of that identity (A is not A1) (Jakobson 1933– 34:750). The surrealists did not accept such autonomy of the word since the word connotes, as Linhartová has pointed out (1972:230), a specific kind of imaginary and surreal object. For Jakobson the structures of surrealism were not as enthralling as the free experimentation of poetism.

Jakobson's sympathized with the poetists' rejection of word fetishism and its replacement by word playfulness. In his 1933–34 paper "What is Poetry?", Jakobson gives an example of Nezval's playful verse, his rhyming schemes which are often like those of childrens' counting verses. These schemes, he holds, annihilate the nineteenth century "inflation of the linguistic sign" (1933–34:748). The following is an example in Czech and in the fine translation of Michael Heim. But of course the translation cannot reproduce the sound–shape and rhyme scheme of Nezval's lines which are their most important characteristics.

Po této cestě jsem nikdy nešel	I've never walked along this path
Ztratil jsem vajíčko kdo je našel	Have I lost the egg who found it?
Bílé vejce černé slepice	A white egg of a black hen
Drží se ho tři dni zimnice	He's been in a fever three whole days
Celou noc vyje pes	The dog's been howling all night long
Jede kněz	The priest, the priest is coming
Žehná všem dveřím	He's blessing all the doors
Jak páv svým peřím...(1971:28)	Like a peacock with its plumage
	(1981:748)

Jakobson defended Nezval against the proletarian poets who had attacked Nezval for betraying the "cause" by writing what seemed to be nonsense verse. For Jakobson it is just these childlike rhymes which are as significant a breakthrough as the carefully thought out, mercilessly logical exhibitionism of his antilyrics. They are an integral part of a united front, a united front to keep the word from being used as a fetish. The latter part of the nineteenth century was a period of sudden, violent inflation of linguistic signs. The most typical cultural phenomena of the time exhibit a determination to conceal this inflation at any cost and shore up faith in the paper word with all available means. Positivism and naive realism in philosophy, liberalism in politics, the *Junggrammatiker* school in linguistics, an assuasive illusionism in literature and on the stage..., the atomization of method in literary theory (and in scholarship and science as a whole) – such are the names of the various and sundry expedients that served to bolster the credit of the word and strengthen confidence in its value.(1981: 748–49).

As he continued, modern phenomenology has exposed the sham of the word–fetish and has demonstrated the importance of the distinction between the sign and its object. And in art, it was finally "the poetry of the poetists (which)...gives a sound guarantee of the autonomy of the word."(1981:749).

Nor were the proletarian writers valued by Teige who, in his 1928 *Manifesto of Poetism* (Teige 1928), criticized them for their addiction to the rational cognitive aspects of language, and expressed his strong preference

for a literature of "pure phantasy" (325). Nezval's own discussion of his work adds his voice to this dissent. In a work entitled with typically poetist panché, "A Parrot On a Motorcycle, Or About The Poet's Craft" (Nezval 1924), he wants modern poetry to be in tune with the nervousness and speed of modern times, echoing the futurists' enchantment with modern technology. Modern poetry must kindle quick associations and a free-flowing imagination. Association for Nezval is poetry's most energizing aspect, indeed it is the essence of poetry, "it is an alchemy that is quicker than the radio....sparks fly from one star to another" (1924:222), and this alchemy is achieved by rhyme which "brings together distant wastelands, times, tribes, and casts by the echo of the word" (*loc. cit.*), and by assonance which "admits of a great number of associations because it is not burdened by acoustical ties as strongly as rhyme" (*loc. cit.*).

Not only the poetry of the poetists, but also their theater attracted Jakobson's penetrating attention. Thus he was strongly drawn to the "Liberated Theater" (*Osvobozené divadlo*) of Voskovec and Werich, a most important center of poetistic art in the twenties and thirties. Jakobson enjoyed the amalgam of social satire and clown-like humor, often exploiting games and punning, and the general playfulness of their productions which he applauded in his contribution to the program notes for the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the theater (Jakobson 1937). Although the letter was published only in 1937, at a time when surrealism had replaced poetism, it treats mainly the poetistic plays of V+W. Here are Jakobson's words that reveal again his love for poetism:

Even though I like your social satire and manyfold literary parody, your most important *novum*, your most original and most timely contribution is, I insist, (your) objectless, pure humor...which is capable of carrying the viewer into the most magical world of the absurd (Jakobson 1981:756).

The kind of subjectless humor produced by V+W delighted Jakobson because of its freedom from conventional meanings (*loc. cit.*). The many examples given by Jakobson, most from the play *Vest pocket revue*, are untranslatable lexical and syntactical puns. I will give only one here, from *Vest pocket revue* which plays on puns related to personal pronouns, and verb shifters, which in Jakobson's later terminology would probably be called shifter puns. The punning is based on misunderstandings caused by the use of the archaic third person form of the pronoun and verb form instead of the second person that is called in Czech *onikání*. I must present it in Czech.

*Houska* (blaseovaně): Poslouchal Áčku, já byl onehda v klubu a mluvil jsem tam s tím dlouhým doktorem, ví? A von mi povídal, že prej von měl v Ritzu na Zbraslavi nákej škandál. Tak se ho jdu na to zeptat.

*Ruka*: No, tak šel, já ho nebudu zdržovat.

*Houska:* No jak to, Áčku, von mi nerozumí, teď jsem tu, tak von mi to musí říct.

*Ruka:* Poslouchal, Bobiku, von je divnej, jak mu to může říct, když tu nikde není.

*Houska:* Kdo?

*Ruka:* No von!

*Houska:* Ale já tu přece jsem, Áčku!

*Ruka:* Tak to von měl ten škandál, Bobiku! Tak povídal!

*Houska:* Ale ne, Áčku! Netahal do toho mne, vo kom vlastně mluvím? Vo něm anebo vo něm?

*Ruka:* Prominul, Bobiku, kdybych mluvil vo něm, tak řeknu von, ne? A když mluvím vo něm jako že mluvím, tak řeknu von, no!

*Houska:* Áčku, teď mi do toho natahal aspoň šest lidí a zatím je v tom jen a jen von. (1981:758–59).

The following lines from Jakobson's letter to V+W discuss the semiotic qualities of the joke (he uses the common Czech word *švanda*):

(*švanda*) is for the audience (as poetry in general) an effective memento exposing the specificity (*svébytnost*) of language, and not only of language but of the world of signs and of its complex relation to the world of things (Jakobson 1981:762).

We conclude by saying that Jakobson remained to the very end fascinated with the "sound shape" of language, a phrase which forms the title of his last published work, *The Sound Shape of Language* (Jakobson and Waugh 1979), which he found in the poetry of the Czech poetists. Jakobson's devotion to this particular nature of poetic language, its formal and sound shape, drew him first to Russian futurism and then in Czech poetism, and finally to a thorough review of this problem in *The Sound Shape*.... But he never neglected his many other interdisciplinary pursuits for which his enthusiasm was also great. Yet the spirit of poetism remained an underlying mood or current in his world view.

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