



Enthymema XXXV 2024

The Three Jakobsons.

Notes Towards a Historical Analysis of  
Roman Jakobson's Contribution to Twentieth-  
Century Literary Theory

Cristian Cámara Outes

Université libre de Bruxelles

**Abstract** – Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) is not currently a highly cited author in the field of literary studies. Along with other inescapable names of the heyday of structuralism, he has fallen into relative oblivion. Although he undoubtedly continues to be recognized as one of the giants of the Human Sciences during the 20th century, his theoretical conceptions and methodological proposals find limited applicability and have been subjected to severe objections by leading contemporary scholars. However, there is ground to believe that this neglect arises from the fact that his entire output has been reduced to the essentialist positions of his later North American period. In this paper, we contend that Jakobson's ideas belonging to the earlier periods of Russian formalism and Czech structuralism have been all too often overlooked, and might have a revitalizing and stimulating impact on contemporary disciplinary discussions.

**Keywords** – Roman Jakobson; Russian Formalism; Czech Structuralism; Structuralism, Literary Theory.

Cámara Outes, Cristian. "The Three Jakobsons. Notes Towards a Historical Analysis of Roman Jakobson's Contribution to Twentieth-Century Literary Theory". *Enthymema*, n. XXXV, 2024, pp. 1-15.

<https://doi.org/10.54103/2037-2426/21750>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported License  
ISSN 2037-2426

# The Three Jakobsons. Notes Towards a Historical Analysis of Roman Jakobson's Contribution to Twentieth-Century Literary Theory<sup>1</sup>

Cristian Cámara Outes  
Université libre de Bruxelles

1.

*There are no true or false theories, there  
are only victorious  
or defeated theories*  
Yuri Tynyanov

Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) is not currently a highly cited author in the field of literary studies. Along with other inescapable names of the heyday of structuralism, he has fallen into relative oblivion. Although he undoubtedly continues to be recognized as one of the giants of the Human Sciences during the 20th century, his theoretical conceptions and methodological proposals find limited applicability and have been subjected to severe objections by leading contemporary scholars. According to Tomáš Kubiček and Andrew Lass, at present time we witness a “systematic forgetting” and “minimal presence” (7) of the author’s theses. G. Bottioli points out that “all his most important contributions to the theory of literature [...] now seem irredeemably part of the past” (231), which is related to its characteristic features of “excess of schematization” and “rigidity” (216). The aforementioned A. Lass elaborates on this same reproach of the “abstract analysis of questionable heuristic value prone to (methodological or metaphysical) formalism” (40), such as the “infamous analysis” of Baudelaire’s poem “Les Chats”, written together with Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1962 (41). Along the same lines, Daniele Maira, referring the Jakobsonian commentary on Joaquim du Bellay’s sonnet CXIII, criticizes its complete lack of interest in models of imitation and formal transfer and its character of “militant criticism”, dogmatically posed as a unique interpretation that excludes any other reading proposal (145).

Jakobson’s lack of topicality should come as little surprise given that the current dominant paradigm in literary studies is founded on a break with previous structuralist theses, which had by the time exhausted their deautomatizing capabilities. The structuralist approach was oriented towards an isolationist type of analysis, focused on the internal centripetal contexture of literary works stripped from their dynamic historical contexts. In the research of so-called dogmatic structuralism from the 1940s to the 1980s, preference was given to the study of semantic components, the work with binary dichotomies, and the relentless search for an underlying universal grammar capable of endorsing predetermined axiological hierarchies. All these traits, among others, find understandable resistance in a different paradigmatic moment with a marked preference for conceptual models aimed at revealing pluralism, hybridism, the

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the project ARC The Artist, The Scientist, The Industrialist of the research group MODERNITAS at ULB/MSH.

## The Three Jakobsons

Cristian Cámara Outes

constructed character of the categories of analysis, systematic instability, and interrupted and conflicting genealogies. In addition, the present moment is defined by the decoupling – perhaps even excessive – of literary studies from the discipline of linguistics, and its approximation to other discursive series from which to glean inspiration and analytical tools.

For students just beginning their studies, it may be hard to imagine the immense prestige that Jakobson enjoyed until around the mid-1980s. At that time, his definitions and methods were incessantly discussed, they were the object of innumerable imitations, and seemed to be the key that would allow to decipher the ultimate secrets of the essence of literariness. As late as 1983, V. Ivanov was able to write that Jakobson was “a man from the future [...] [who] belonged more to the twenty first century than to the twentieth (qtd. in Stütiste 7). The twenty-first century has indeed arrived and has found no place for the author, and endless discussions about the essence of literariness have become something that causes merely suspicion or invincible fatigue.

However, there is ground to believe that Jakobson’s undeniable neglect arises from the fact that his entire output has been reduced to the essentialist positions of his later period, ensuing his arrival in the United States in 1941, when he became one of the leaders of the international structuralist movement. There can be little doubt that Jakobson had an extraordinary personal and intellectual destiny and participated successively in three of the most innovative and influential theoretical movements of the 20th century: Russian formalism, Czech functional structuralism and “dogmatic” structuralism (Sériot 40). This is indeed something well known but it tends to be overlooked when generalizing summaries of the whole of the author's intellectual contribution are made. It is quite possible that Jakobson himself is responsible for this, for the excessive identification of his entire output with his latest positions, due to a number of strategies of disfiguring self-description that he repeatedly put in place, mostly in his last years but occasionally also before. To some extent, Jakobson has come down to us as a convoluted historical enigma, largely one of his own concoction, and which perhaps in the present moment has finally acquired legibility as such.

In the light of the above, the objective that I set myself in the following lines is very limited. It is not about revealing new materials or testing new interpretative hypotheses, but at most a new arrangement of widely known materials. I will try to highlight Jakobson's internal heterogeneity and briefly outline some of the guiding theoretical assumptions of the three phases of his intellectual production. In this way, I will try to draw attention to the need to make explicit which Jakobson we are talking about in a specific text: Jakobson I, Jakobson II or Jakobson III, who, as we will see, have radically different poetological conceptions. The ultimate reason is that, although Jakobson III is in effect irretrievable for today, he is “irredeemably part of the past”, both Jakobson I and Jakobson II have fundamental contributions to make in the current situation of studies, each of them differently, and they could indicate plausible ways of enriching ongoing disciplinary dialogues.

## 2.

Roman Jakobson's intellectual trajectory can be described as a shift between three theoretical positions that are radically incommensurable with each other, and whose incompatibility was forcibly omitted in the self-accounts that the author carried out in his later years but also occasionally earlier. The examples briefly listed in our first point coincide in attributing to Jakobson I and II all the characteristic features of Jakobson III, or at least not making the differences among them sufficiently explicit. In this way, following the lead offered by Jakobson III himself, they obstruct a potential influx of enriching ideas for the current situation of literary studies. But these examples are by no means unique. Sergei Glebov explains that “[Jakobson's] association with Opojaz was ephemeral and indirect” (228).

## The Three Jakobsons

Cristian Cámara Outes

According to this scholar, from the very beginning of his career Jakobson was always interested in the “search for the universal”: “the search for the universal became the fundamental task, and for Jakobson this task morphed into a whole series of projects, from Futurism to Eurasianism and phonology” (226). Catherine Depretto, in her article “Roman Jakobson et le formalisme russe” (2019), to a large extent agrees with this assesment: “[Jakobson] reste opposé a une trop grande valorisation du contexte historico-littéraire et du relativisme généralisé auquel aboutit en définitive Tynjanov dans son conception de l'évolution littéraire [...]. Ce qui l'estimule, c'est la recherche des invariants, des structures profondes, de ce qui est permanent dans la variété” (98). In O. Hansen-Löve we also find the claim of an essential identity between the theses of Jakobson I and Jakobson III: “The well-known work *The New Russian Poetry* (1921) was not only his first relevant research but also laid the foundations of a fundamental poetics that he would later expose in the article ‘Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry’ and in other works of classical structuralism”(26).

Ilya Kalinin, in his article “Viktor Shklovsky vs Roman Jakobson. Poetic Language or Poetic Function of Language” (2017), returns once again to the causes of the dispute between the two former friends, this time leaving aside the personal disagreements and focusing on the “theoretical dimension” of it: “I am referring to theoretical divergences that were implicitly present in the two men’s understanding of the nature of poetic language *from the very inception of their careers*, and which became more and more apparent from the start of the 1930s in the work of Jakobson (344, underlining added). According to the author, the central point of the dispute is that structuralism would defend the existence of a single language that can teleologically assume various dominant functions, while formalism postulates an internal conflict or contradiction as an inherent fact of language itself. To develop his argument, Kalinin resorts to the article “On poetic language” (1940) by Jan Mukařovský:

Thanks to the contemporary linguistics, which recognizes internal distinctions in correspondence with the goals pursued by linguistic representations [...], poetic language has been revealed to as a basic component of the language system, possessed of its *own law governed development*, and as important factor in the general capability *to express oneself with the help of language*”. (qtd. in Kalinin 247, underlining added)

Certainly, the quote has been skillfully chosen to economically illustrate the two points that Kalinin wants to emphasize. In the first place, regarding cultural historicity, formalism repudiates the idea of a “law governed development” (nomogenesis) and aims to describe “a model of literary history based on mechanisms of conflict and struggle, rather than succession and inheritance” (248). Secondly, regarding the conception of poetic referentiality, Kalinin quite rightly points out the persistence of an instrumental, logocentric idea of communicative language as a tool for the “expression” of previous contents, and therefore the rhetorical determination of poetic language as mere supplementary ornamentation. In opposition to this, Kalinin resorts to Shklovsky's article “On Poetry and Zaum Language” (1916) in which an opposite conception is enunciated that problematizes the representative nature of language and emphasizes a whole heterogeneous series of linguistic phenomena where sound exceeds meaning, correspondence relations between both dimensions is destabilized and a different, “deformed” notion of poetic semantics arises. In this alternative notion the poem is rather the occasion of an unpredictable event than the custodian of a predetermined equivalence. The conclusions that Kalinin establishes are very illuminating and are worth quoting at length:

Shklovsky rejected in general the classical model of semiotics structuring the relationship between sign and meaning. He describes the space of poetic language as a space of pure motion, relationships of materials and surfaces, whose contacts produce pleasure [...]. A completely different tradition than the one that Jakobson would come to personify. Early formalism, that

## The Three Jakobsons

### Cristian Cámara Outes

announced its existence together with trans-sense poetry of the futurists, was opposed to the classical poetics of expression that would be inherited by structuralism. In the case of Formalism, we are facing not the start of just another theory of representation, but rather a movement in the direction of what would be later described as “textuality” in the works of R. Barthes and J. Kristeva, who emancipated description in the process of meaning- and form-production from the reign of autonomous subject's conscious intentions, discovering a more fundamental level of the text, connected with the unconscious mechanisms of desire and transforming the text into a free play of signifiers. (249-50)

Once again, we find in this passage the same excessive identification between the three Jakobsons. In particular, Jakobson II has been reduced here to Jakobson III, and Jakobson I has been completely erased. In the interview that Jakobson III gave to Krystina Pomorska in 1980, published under the title “My Favourite Topics”, he famously stated the following: “the issue of invariants in the midst of variation has been the dominant theme and methodological resource underlying my research work” (*Arte verbal, signo verbal, tiempo verbal* 21). Jakobson III's self-mystifications have created a historical enigma that is difficult to unravel and that has led astray contemporary commentators. In his formalist texts written during the late 1910s and early 1920s, we will find an unwavering commitment with the principles of nihilism, relativism, and iconoclasm characteristic of all the members of Opojaz. If Shklovsky in 1921 wrote “art is ironic and destructive, it makes the world come alive” (151) and Tynyanov, a few years later, “any essentialist definition of literariness is swept away by the fact of evolution” (170), Jakobson I likewise championed between 1919 and 1921 that the task of art was “to destroy and annihilate all cultural relics” (“Ocherednye zadachi nauki ob iskusstve” 99); that the characteristic feature of the present era was “the overcoming of statics, the discarding of the absolute” (“Futurism” 31); and that the new literary science must proclaim the end of the sacred value routinely accorded to art: “The first result of establishing a scientific view of artistic expression, that is, the laying bare of the device, is the cry ‘the old art is dead’ or ‘art is dead’ [...]. Let us be frank: poetry and painting occupy in our consciousness an excessively high position only because of tradition” (“On Realism in Art” 38-9).

To a certain extent, the literary theory put forward by Jakobson II and Czech functional structuralism can be assimilated to the “classical aesthetics of expression” identified by Kalinin. However, the complete reduction of Czech functional structuralism to later dogmatic structuralism radically obstructs the recognition of the complexity and sophistication of the theoretical system developed by the members of the Prague Circle. During the first epoch of the development of the school, between 1926 and 1948, the Czech authors elaborated a theoretical system on the basis of the dialectical transposition of the formalist theses within a more comprehensive semiotic conception. Czech functional structuralism is historical, sociological, semiotic, relativistic, attentive to the internal dynamism of works and to the conflictive displacements they can occupy within internally stratified aesthetic and social systems. One of its main features is the openness towards different horizons of interpretation while safeguarding the structural identity of the work codified in the immanent dimension of the “artifact”. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus in just one of the aspects that Kalinin brings forward, that of poetic semantics, with the aim of briefly outlining the different positions developed by Jakobson on this issue and display their mutual incommensurability.

### 3.

From the very outset, Russian formalism was oriented towards the overthrow and subversion of the symbolist conception of poetic meaning as a glimpse of transcendent contents, and its substitution by another that describes the processes of signification as located exclusively in

## The Three Jakobsons

Cristian Cámara Outes

the formal instance, in accordance with the model provided by the contemporary radical experiments of Russian futurism. At first, the formalists lacked a technical terminology to refer to the anti-metaphysical orientation of their conceptions, and they had to resort to an abusive displacement and transposition of terms hijacked from such canonized disciplines of the time as W. Wundt's psychology or E. Saran's and W. Sievers' *Ohrenphilologie*. Soon enough, however, the formalist authors embarked on the coinage of specific terms that would allow to account for a maximally generalizing interpretation of the self-referential turn undertaken by avant-garde artistic practices. During the first years of the school, the formalists came up with a series of terminological inventions that have largely kept intact —if unexploited— until this day its full descriptive potential. According to Shklovsky, the zaum or transrational language of the futurist poets “tends towards language”, thus indicating a paradoxical essence of language as dynamic exteriority inscribed within it (88). In a later text, referring to the poetry of Ilya Zdanevich, Shklovsky uses the term “aura of meaning”: “It is not just a question here of words devoid of meaning. Zdanevich has the ability to awaken an aura of meaning with his insignificant words, his meaningless words generate meanings” (qtd. in Feshchenko 191). Other terms invented by Shklovsky and which had enormous repercussion were those of the “unmotivated” nature of the work of art and the “laying bare of the procedure”, for example in his analysis of the parodic narrative of L. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: “His novels are characterized by the laying bare of the procedure. The artistic form is offered outside any motivation and exclusively as itself. The difference that exists between a novel by Sterne and a conventional novel is the same as that between a conventional poem, written using a specific phonic instrumentation, and a futurist poem written in transrational language” (211). Osip Brik in his studies on poetic rhythm uses the term “rhythmic semantics” (34), while Y. Tynyanov in his book *The Problem of Poetic Language* (1924) devises a variety of definitions to underscore the immanent and dynamic nature of poetic significance, among them those of “deformed meaning”, “apparent semantics”, “oscillation of primary and secondary indications” or “textual equivalents”. In his recapitulatory article “The Theory of the Formal Method” (1925), B. Eikhenbaum summarizes the efforts of the first period of the school as an attempt to forge a renewed conceptualization of the artistic form: “the notion of form thus obtained different meaning and required no complementary notion, no correlation” (30).

Jakobson I's texts throughout his early period are perfectly aligned with this same concern for terminological innovation. It can be considered that Jakobson I makes a fundamental contribution in overcoming the first formalist stage, focused on strictly phonocentric analyses, towards a second one of transposition of the initial results towards broader fields. Jakobsonian analyses explicitly draw from Shklovskian notions and develop them with conceptual brilliance and operational clarity, giving rise to innovations that will later be taken up by other authors such as Eikhenbaum or Tynyanov, in an incessant dialogue of sorts in which it becomes difficult to establish clear chronological priorities. Throughout this phase it seems clear that the main rival to defeat for Jakobson I are the type of considerations that will later be characteristic of Jakobson III. If the latter is always in search of pristine, “immediate significance” (*The Sound Shape of language* 231), the former denounces this as “naïve realism”, as “fetishism” and as “elementary illusionism”. The relations between Jakobson I and Jakobson III are clearly of contradiction, of frontal opposition between essential postulates, and in no case of development or progressive clarification.

One of Jakobson I's fundamental precepts, to which he returns again and again in his texts, is precisely that of the conventional and artificial nature of any artistic representation. In “On Realism in Art” (1921) the author begins by pointing out that all successive artistic trends are *realistic* in their first conflicting moment of appearance, what Jakobson calls its “Sturm und Drang stage”. This is in line with the logic of deautomatization, whereby each new form

## The Three Jakobsons

### Cristian Cámara Outes

emerges not to express a new content but to supplant a previous form that has lost its aesthetic efficacy. For both Shklovsky and Jakobson I, this efficacy depends on the application of a certain violence (“deformation”), consisting in their ability to approach reality in a new way, to show the world as not yet seized by meaning:

The methods of projecting three-dimensional space onto a flat surface are established by convention; the use of color, the abstracting, the simplification of the object depicted, and the choice of reproducible features are all based on convention. It is necessary to learn the conventional language of painting in order to “see” a picture [...]. This conventional, traditional aspect of painting to a great extent conditions the very act of our visual perception. As tradition accumulates, the painting becomes an ideogram, a formula, to which the object portrayed is linked by contiguity. Recognition becomes instantaneous. We no longer see the picture. The ideogram needs to be deformed. The artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perceptions, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before. He may present the object in an unusual perspective; he may violate the rules of composition canonized by his predecessors [...]. The motivation behind this “disorder” is the desire for a closer approximation to reality, the urge to deform an ideogram usually underlines the Sturm und Drang stage of new artistic currents. (“On Realism in Art” 21)

The conventionality of the artistic sign, the opposition between “vision” and “recognition”, the dynamic antithetical logic or the exaltation of novelty above any other value are features common to the theory of Shklovsky and Jakobson I. It can be said that we are faced with two different versions of the same theory. Jakobson I also shares the notion that the antinomic essence of art has characterized its evolution at all times, but that it has only recently become self-conscious, neglecting any kind of supplementary expressive-mimetic motivation and focusing in its own “faktura”. In the article “Futurism” (1919) Jakobson dwells on this particular aspect of the self-referencing turn:

It was in the 20th century that painting first consistently broke off with the tendencies of naive realism [...]. The set towards nature created for painting an obligatory connection precisely of such parts which are in essence disconnected, whereas the mutual dependence of form and color was not recognized. On the contrary, a set toward pictorial expression resulted in the creative realization of the necessity of another connection, where the object is freely interpenetrated by other forms [...]. The emancipation of painting from elementary illusionism entails and intensive elaboration of various areas of pictorial expression. The correlations of volumes, constructive asymmetry, chromatic contrast, and texture enter the foreground of the artist's consciousness. The results of this realization are the following: (1) the canonization of a series of devices, which thus also allows us to speak of cubism as a school; (2) the laying bare of the device. Thus the realized texture no longer seeks any sort of justification for itself, it becomes autonomous and demands for itself new methods of formulation, new materials. (“Futurism” 29-30)

One of the specific features of Jakobson I, in comparison with his fellow formalists, is his much more lapidary and brutal polemical style, which contrasts with the more allusive and circumspect style, more Benjaminian as it were, of Tynyanov or Eikhenbaum. On many occasions Jakobson I exposes with outmost clarity what the other members of the Opojaz leave as implied. One good example of this is the great pains Jakobson I takes to make explicit the dissolving epistemological consequences of deautomatization. Jakobson I devotes great energy to integrating formalist theory and avant-garde artistic practice within an epochal transformation that implies the collapse of all values considered universal, and the appearance of a new general paradigm founded exclusively on change and instability. In the article mentioned, Futurism is the incarnation of the “new aesthetic” precisely because of its orientation towards impermanence, because it does not try to become another new “artistic school”, unlike Cubism, but to convey an incessant transgression of its own forms: the task

## The Three Jakobsons

### Cristian Cámara Outes

of the present is to “sharpen the struggle between artistic tendencies, since in this struggle lies the life and evolution of art” (“Zadacha khudozhestvennoi propagandy” 100). Destruction here does not have the meaning of giving rise to a new construction, but rather of proliferating on itself, via “the absolutization of the dismantling process itself” (Glanc 215).

Besides its penchant for artificialism and incessant displacement, Jakobson I’s semantics of poetry also shares with Russian formalism the foregrounding of a diverse ontology embedded in deautomatization that exposes the world as an incessant Nietzschean becoming of forces. For Jakobson I, art “battles against the automation of perception” and therefore also helps to “revitalize the object” (“Futurism” 32). In “On Realism in Art” Jakobson I gives preference to the term “allegorical signification” to refer to this unusual and difficult word that delays the petrified recognition of objects and allows the experience of them in a way as yet-outside-meaning: “But as soon as the name has merged with the object it designates, we must, conversely, resort to metaphor, allusion, or allegory if we wish a more expressive term [...]. To put it another way, when searching for a word which will revitalize an object, we pick a far-fetched word, unusual at least in its given application, a word which is forced into service” (“On Realism in Art” 21-2). Another striking Jakobsonian formulation is that art poses a kind of empty enigma: “A particular instance of impeded perception [...] is like a riddle which deliberately leads to a false conclusion” (“On Realism in Art” 33).

The work *The New Russian Poetry* (1921), dedicated to the experimental poetry of V. Khlebnikov, can be considered as part of the same effort to overcome traditional conceptions and advance a problematization of the transgressive semantics of art as a materialist epiphany. The experiments of Russian futurism are of greater value than those of Italian futurism because the latter can be seen most frequently than not as an attempt to assimilate language to the condition of onomatopoeia, they do not abandon the scope of what Jakobson I calls “reportage” and therefore the ultimately “motivated” character of art (its anchorage in the referred reality) (*Noveishaya russkaya poeziia* 3-5). In opposition to this, Khlebnikov’s zaum language, made up of invented words, etymological games, and shattered and recombined words, consists first of all in a flat rejection of any kind of realistic motivation and exposure of his own making or “laying bare of the procedure” (16). The meaning of the words of the standard language and that of the already automated poetic language is characterized by its statism, it certainly fulfills a fundamental function in communication but it cannot subsume the totality of language. The meaning of Khlebnikov’s neologisms is given “in statu nascendi” (28) and implies a “semantic deformation” that is characteristic of poetry always and in all cases, but which Khlebnikov exposes ostensibly: “The enumerated examples of semantical and phonetical deformation are visible to the naked eye, so to speak, but by its very essence any word in poetic language (as opposed to practical language) is both phonetically and semantically deformed” (29). Jakobson I examines here different procedures employed by Khlebnikov for evacuating the content dimension of works. In some cases it is about the cancellation of the reference to external objects, in others the obstruction of what he calls the “internal form” (a term borrowed from Husserl —via Shpet— or Humboldt —via Potebnia— that appears here as subordinated and integrated into an anti-idealistic poetics), and finally, of the “disintegration of the external form”. However, it is the case that for Jakobson I the tension towards this extreme is what characterizes poetry and art as such:

In a series of procedures of Khlebnikov’s poetry we have been able to observe the same phenomenon: the attenuation of meaning and the autonomy of the euphonic construction [...]. Such words are like in a search for meaning. In such a case, perhaps, one should not speak of an absence of semantics, but rather, more precisely, of words with a negative internal form [...]. In a series of procedures we have seen how the word in Khlebnikov’s poetry first loses its objecthood, then loses its internal form, and finally even its external form disintegrates [...]. Poetic



## The Three Jakobsons

### Cristian Cámara Outes

language struggles, as if towards a certain extreme, to become a euphonious word, a zaum discourse (42-3).

#### 4.

Jakobson III's conception of poetic semantics is undoubtedly much better known and it is not necessary to spend much time on it. It is expressed with few variations in famous articles such as "Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning" (1942), "Linguistics and Poetics" (1958), "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry" (1960) "Quest for the Essence of Language" (1965) or *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979). In this last book we read the following: "That spell of the sheer sound of words which bursts out in the expressive, sourcerous, mythopoetic, tasks of language, and to the utmost extent in poetry, supplements and counterbalances the specific linguistic device of 'double articulation', and supersedes its disunity by endowing the distinctive features themselves with the power of immediate significance" (*The Sound Shape of Language* 231). Jakobson III's poetic semantics could be defined as a particularly mystified variant—one which resorts to a laborious pseudoscientific apparatus—to reaffirm the conception of the Platonic and rhetorical tradition of poetry as a deviant language, which thanks to an instant of strategic self-referential closure acquires renewed powers to overcome (*supplement, counterbalance, supersede*) the precariousness of communicative language and grasp the unfading essence of things. It could be called an anti-modernist semantic theory, if the term modernism had any meaning.

On its part, Jakobson II's theory of poetic semantics can be found scattered in various texts from his Prague period. Among them, in what follows I will comment on the article "What is poetry?" (1934) that encompasses several features and methodological resources of the author's production at the time. The peculiar argumentative strategy developed in the text will allow me to address some of the central tenets of Czech poetics and the issue of the shift between Russian formalism and Czech functional structuralism.

To some extent, the relationship between Jakobson I and Jakobson II can be seen as one of dialectical integration into a higher whole. Czech structuralism does not simply reject the results of formalist analyzes. The members of the Prague Circle were attentive readers of the extreme theses of Shklovsky or Tynyanov, discussed them in depth, combined them with different other sources of inspiration, and held a dialogue with them practically throughout the entire duration of the first epoch of the evolution of the school. Thus, although Mukařovský already in 1934, in the article "On the Translation of Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*", considers that Czech structuralism has overcome the formalist "unilateralism" and is capable of advantageously describe "the set of processes that characterize the literary work as a semantic unit" (60), still a decade later, in the article "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art" (1943) he continues to struggle tooth and nail with the notion of deautomatization in his definition of the key term of unintentionality as an essential component of artistic activity.

Generally speaking, the final results of the formalist analyses, with their consequences of negativity and nihilism, are taken by the authors of the Prague Circle as starting points in a laborious and intricate reconstruction that seeks to re-establish the validity of traditional concepts and categories of analysis of literary studies, such as those of aesthetic value, organic work, literary genre, hierarchical canon, poetic meaning or finally in the foundation of the essence of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere. Formalist negativity is reintegrated into structuralist analyzes through a long dialectical path that situates it as an antithetical position that must be overcome, although in a certain sense preserved in this overcoming ("Aufhebung"). This means that negativity is not simply neutralized but instead given a broad place of analytical effectiveness, which can be considered as significantly enriching the Czech theoretical system and granting it undoubted descriptive abilities of complex historical and

## The Three Jakobsons

### Cristian Cámara Outes

social phenomena. Secondly, in addition to the dialectical reintegration, the strategy set out by the Prague authors in their reading of the formalist theses consists in their transposition within a semiotic scheme of art as a communicative fact with a final anthropological base. As we saw earlier in Kalinin's argument, this transposition implies the repositioning of Prague functional aesthetics within the "aesthetics of expression" tradition and the implicit de-problematization of linguistic referentiality as a central or "unmarked" function of language. In this sense the poetics of the CLP clearly separates itself from formalism, but it is nevertheless necessary to point out that the notion of "function" of the Czech authors, like all their other terms, is marked by a wide degree of historical variability and dynamism.

We can see an example of all this in Jan Mukařovský's analysis of aesthetic value or "poetic denomination". A characteristic feature of Mukařovský's style is a zigzag type of argumentation: the author usually begins his analyzes of any subject in question with a moment of demolition and annihilation, exposing the precariousness of the foundations hitherto used to support the building of the poetics. This first destructive moment is usually followed by a second moment of reconstruction on the new firm foundations provided by the dialectical and semiotic methodology of the CLP. The notion of aesthetic value had been subjected to an abrasive criticism by the formalists, who replaced it with that of "novelty", in synchronous systems, and that of "evolutionary significance", permanently susceptible to reinterpretation, in the diachronic consideration. Mukařovský, in the first movement of his argument, reaches the same conclusions, the only characteristic feature of aesthetic evaluations is their constant variability: "variability belongs to the very essence of aesthetic value, which is not a state, a place, but a process, an *energeia*" (178). However, for Mukařovský this is not the end point, here begins a reconstruction of the aesthetic value that reaffirms it on new bases:

However, have we solved with this (or, rather, eliminated) the problem of the objectivity of the aesthetic value as something inherent in the material work? [...]. If we do not want to unduly confuse epistemology with metaphysics, we could think, as we did with regard to the aesthetic norm, in the anthropological constitution of man, which is common to all human beings and acts as the basis of a constant relationship between man and the work, a relationship that, once projected onto the material phenomenon, would manifest itself as an objective aesthetic value (182)

The same occurs in the case of poetic denomination. The first moment of the argument is destructive: the poem is fundamentally characterized by a turn towards its own linguistic constitution, which amputates it of any ability to refer to the real world. Immediately, however, comes the second moment of recovery:

Does this mean that the poetic work is deprived of any relationship with reality? If the answer were affirmative, art would be reduced to a game whose sole purpose would be aesthetic pleasure. Such a conclusion would obviously be incomplete. Therefore, we must continue the investigation of the poetic denomination to demonstrate that the weakening of the relationship between the sign and the reality directly referred to by it does not exclude the relationship between the work and reality as a whole; even more, that it results in the benefit of this relationship [...]. It is this denomination of a higher order, represented by the work as a whole, which enters into a powerful relationship with reality (102).

Exactly the same argumentative strategy is unfolded by Jakobson II in "What is poetry?". First, Jakobson II deploys the moment of negativity. The author begins by advancing a negative ascertainment: it is impossible to determine and define the essence of poetry, both the poetic themes and the procedures used by poets are constantly changing, they are successively transformed from one generation to another, from one state of system to another. It is impossible to define in advance a theme or a procedure of such an intrinsically poetic

## The Three Jakobsons

Cristian Cámara Outes

nature that it cannot fall outside the definition of literariness at a later moment in the system, and conversely there is no linguistic fact that we currently perceive as external to literature that cannot at a future moment shift to occupy a central position: “The borderline dividing what is a work of poetry is not less stable than the frontiers of Chinese empire's territories” (369).

Within this destructive section, Jakobson II recovers some of the arguments that were characteristic of his previous texts. One of them is the diatribe against the immediate nature of artistic signs, their consideration as a direct incarnation of the truth. Poetry is also defined here, at first, by its conventionality and artificiality, in a very Shklovskian (and Nietzschean) twist: “when an author tears off his mask, make up is sure to be forthcoming [...]. The artist is playing no less a game when he announces that this time he is dealing with naked Wahrheit rather than Dichtung” (379). The author also takes up a theory of poetic reference as an ontological affectation characteristic of his formalist texts of the early twenties: “Every verbal art in a certain sense stylizes and transforms the event it depicts” (374), which opposes the illusionist tendencies of naïve realism “that served to bolster the credit of the word and strengthen confidence in its value” (377). At this moment, artistic systems are defined by constant and conflictive displacements from the center to the periphery and vice versa, and the introduction of a new direction or trend, which affects the totality of systematic intertwined relationships, is often random and unpredictable. An example of this is the appearance of cinema as a new art that disrupts the previously existing relationships between different artistic languages: “In art it was motion pictures that revealed clearly and emphatically that language was only one of a number of possible sign systems, just as astronomy had revealed Earth was only one of a number of planets and thus revolutionized man's view of the world [...]. The film was to at first regarded as no more than an exotic colony of art, and only as it developed, step by step, did it break asunder the ruling ideology that preceded it (377).

But in any case, this moment of negativity (impossibility of defining poetry, random displacements not governed teleologically, transgressive systematic significance of works) is included within a movement of positive reconstruction. There is a dialectical reconciliation that partially sutures the variability and instability revealed in the first section and gives it a firm analytical foundation. This basis is the definition of the poetic function of language:

As I have already pointed out, the content of the concept of poetry is unstable and temporarily conditioned. But the poetic function, the poeticity, is, as the formalists stressed, an element sui generis, one that cannot be mechanically reduced to other elements [...]. For the most part, poeticity is only a part of a complex structure, but it is a part that necessarily transforms the other elements and determines with them the nature of the whole.

But how does poeticity manifest itself? Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not as a mere representation of the object or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.

Why is all this necessary? Why is it necessary to make a special point of the fact that sign does not fall altogether with object? Because, 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). The reason why this antinomy is essential is that without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized. Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of reality dies out. (378)

At first glance, this might seem like a new formulation of the same deautomatization theory of Shklovsky and Jakobson I. However, it is easy to see that in this case the most dissolving consequences are neutralized by the different place that the contradiction occupies within of the system. In Shklovsky contradiction was conceived as the essence of language: reality and language were equally dragged in an incessant movement of dynamic incoincidence. In

## The Three Jakobsons

### Cristian Cámara Outes

Jakobson II this contradiction occupies a limited place: it is encased by the poetic function as a deviant function and therefore it does not infect the central definition of the referential function of language. Contradiction and incoincidence are superimposed here as a certain enrichment on a “direct denomination”, that by itself is not called into question. The poetic function of language, poeticity, is stable, it is that anchorage that allows superficial phenomenal variability, itself subtracted from change but making possible the multiplicity of phenomena.

## 5.

Elsewhere I have tried to expose the various valences of the term deautomatization as a maximally overarching aesthetic concept (Cámara Outes 342). The incessantly transgressive logic of deautomatization affects from its very origin the relationships postulated by Russian formalism in the fields of: 1) semiotics (internal relations to the sign and the literary work); 2) interformal (both synchronic and diachronic relationships between forms, leading to the emptying of any essentialist definition of terms such as “genre” or “literariness”); and 3) ontological (in the sense that deautomatization points to a diverse ontology that exposes the world as an incessant Nietzschean becoming of forces). In addition to these three basic valences that can be considered consolidated, in recent years stimulating studies have appeared that seem to point to the configuration of two other differentiated valences of deautomatization: 4) ideological (which allows the critical unveiling of the constructed character of all discourse and its lack of anchorage in the nature of things); and 5) existential (as a certain type of Faustian demand, fanatically traumatophilic, addressed to the subjects in relation to the temporality they inhabit).

In this paper I have focused, due to space constraints, on the first of the valences and in particular the question of poetic semantics. I hope to have been able to show that, on this issue, Jakobson's positions vary enormously from one period of his production to another, despite the prevailing scholarly consensus and despite late Jakobson's own attempts to misrepresent his intellectual trajectory (“the issue of invariants in the midst of variation has been the dominant theme and methodological resource underlying my research work”). It would be easy to see that, as far as the other valences are concerned, we find out a similar shift between three distinct moments.

It is quite possible that the separations are not as clear-cut as I may at some point have implied for explanatory purposes. If Jakobson I and Jakobson III are undoubtedly uncompromising and extreme in their opposing positions, Jakobson II remains the most intriguing and difficult to define. Jakobson II at many points turns to theoretical elaborations very similar to those of his first formalist period, as for example in articles such as “Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak” (1935) or “In Memory of V. V. Hanka” (1931), despite the fact that these positions may also be considered to be integrated within – at a certain extreme – Czech functional structuralism, defined by methodological breadth and flexibility. In the analysed article “What is Poetry” the distortion of formalist notions and their replacement by a different conceptualisation occurs with explicit reference to his former comrades: “Neither Tynjanov nor Mukařovský nor Šklovskij nor I have ever proclaimed the self-sufficiency of art” etc. (“What is Poetry?” 378), establishing a de facto continuity or even identity of what he calls the “formalist school of literary studies” including both Russian formalism and Czech structuralism. The article he co-wrote with Tynjanov, “Problems of the Study of Literature and Language” (1928), is a perplexing conundrum and an impeccably Menardian text: it has one meaning if read as the work of one of the authors and a different meaning if read as the work of the other.

Jakobson II often also foreshadows the characteristic positions of Jakobson III, as for example in the texts devoted to the question of Eurasianism and those in which he adapts the

## The Three Jakobsons

### Cristian Cámara Outes

notion of literary evolution as “nomogenesis”, borrowed from the anti-Darwinian biologist Lev Berg. The notion of nomegenesis has the objective of erasing the unpredictable and transgressive nature of literary innovation and subjecting it to a much more regular and pacified design (“Theses” 7). But arguably the most remarkable text from this period in terms of the author's relations with the formalist tenets is *The Formal School and Contemporary Literary Science in Russia* (1934), the result of his lectures at the Masaryk University in Brno. In this text we find a devastating critique of the postulates of formalism, under the disguise of an explanation, and the introduction of the idea of formalism as “childhood disease” of literary theory that will later be dominant in different reappraisals for several decades. In this text, the key notion of the “dominant”, having in formalist analyzes energetic and disruptive — Nietzschean— character, is transposed to refer to practically the opposite, the guarantee of the integrity of the structure, both inside the work and in the diachronic study of displacements between systems:

The first three stages of the Formalist research have been briefly characterized as follows: (1) analysis of the sound aspect of a literary work; (2) problems of meaning within the framework of poetics; (3) integration of sound and meaning into an inseparable whole. During this last stage, the concept of dominant was particularly fruitful (...). It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure [...].

Inquiry into the dominant had important consequences for Formalists views of literary evolution. In the evolution of poetic form it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergences of others as the question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system; in other words, a question of the shifting dominant [...]. In the earlier works of Šklovskij, a poetic work was defined as a mere sum of artistic devices, while poetic evolution appeared nothing more than a substitution of certain devices. With the further development of Formalism, there arose the more accurate conception of a poetic work as a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this hierarchy [...]. The image of Russian literary history substantially changes; it becomes incomparably richer and at the same time more monolithic, more synthetic and ordered, than were the membra disjecta of previous literary scholarship [...]. The formalist studies brought to light that this simultaneous preservation of tradition and breaking away from tradition form the essence of every new work of art. (751-6)

This text is a strange epilogue to the literary theory of Russian formalism, an exercise in unhinged ventriloquism. All the terms that appeared valued positively in the formalist theory (fragmentarism, rupture, chance, unpredictability, etc.) now appear marked by a negative sign, and vice versa. The image of Russian formalism is now associated with the inseparable union between signifier and signified, the integrity of structure, and literary evolution as monolithic, synthetic, and ordered. Surely, it is less important to focus on ethical aspects or psychological reasons than to insist once again that later Jakobson distorted and neutralised the reception of the theoretical theses of formalism (and his own) during the second half of the twentieth century and to a significant degree until today. The recognition of Jakobson's historical mystery and internal heterogeneity is a condition for the full recovery of his contribution on the part of the present.

## 6. References

- Bottiroli, Giovanni. “What is Alive and What is Dead in Jakobson. From Codes to Styles.” *Roman Jakobson. Linguística e poética*, edited by Edoardo Esposito, Stefania Sini, and Marina Castagneto, Ledizioni, 2019, pp. 213-220.
- Brik, Osip. “Ritmo y sintaxis.” *Teoría de la literatura de los formalistas rusos*, edited by Tzvetan

The Three Jakobsons  
Cristian Cámara Outes

- Todorov, siglo XXI, 2007, pp. 147-156.
- Cámara Outes, Cristian. "Valencias de la desautomatización en la teoría literaria del formalismo ruso." *Tropelías: Revista de teoría de la literatura y literatura comparada*, no. 34, 2020, pp. 342-361.
- Depretto, Catherine. "Roman Jakobson et el formalisme russe." *Roman Jakobson. Linguistica e poetica*, edited by Edoardo Esposito, Stefania Sini, and Marina Castagneto, L'Edizione, 2019, pp. 89-103.
- Eikhenbaum, Boris. "La teoría del método formal." *Teoría de la literatura de los formalistas rusos*, edited by Tzvetan Todorov, siglo XXI, 2007, pp. 31-76.
- Erlich, Viktor. *El formalismo ruso*, Seix Barral, 1974.
- Feshchenko, V. V. "O zaumnnoi poezii, zhemchuzhnom jazyke i zvukopisi: I. Zdanevich a V. Shklovsky." *Metodologija i praktika ruskogo formalizma*. Brikovsky sbornik no. IV, edited by Viekschin, G. V., Azbukovnik, 2014.
- Glanc, Tomaš. "Kosmopoliticheskoe mesivo «De Dieu et de Borde»: Chto dumal Roman Jakobson o Dada." *Matica Srpska Journal of Slavic Studies*, no. 92, 2017, pp. 211-217.
- Glebov, Sergei. "Roman Jakobson: Veliky shifter." *Formalny metod: Antologija ruskogo modernizma*, t. III, edited by Serguei Oushakine, Kabinet uchiony, 2016, pp. 221-245.
- Hansen-Löve, Oge. "Perspektivy ruskogo formalizma: Logotsentrizm vchera i segognia." *Epokha ostraneniia. Russky formalizm i sovremennoe gumanitarnoe znanie*, edited by Igor Pilshchikov and Jan Levchenko, NLO, 2017, pp. 21-41.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Theses Presented to the First Congress of Slavic Philologists in Prague." 1929. *The Prague School. Selected Writings, 1929-1946*, edited by Peter Steiner, University of Texas Press, 1982.
- . "The Dominant." 1934. *Selected Writings*, vol. III, Mouton Publishers, 1981, pp. 751-756.
- . "On Realism in Art." 1921. *Language in Literature*. Belknap Press, 1987, pp. 19-27.
- . "Futurism." 1919. *Language in Literature*. Belknap Press, 1987, pp. 28-33.
- . "What is Poetry." 1934. *Language in Literature*. Belknap Press, 1987, pp. 368-378.
- . "Ocherednye zadachi nauki ob iskusstve." 1919. *Budetlianin nauki: Vospominaniia, Pisma, Stati, Stiji, Proza*. Hylea, 2012, pp. 97-99.
- . "Zadacha khudozhestvennoi propagandy." 1919. *Budetlianin nauki: Vospominaniia, Pisma, Stati, Stiji, Proza*. Hylea, 2012, pp. 100-102.
- . "Novoe iskusstvo na zapade." 1920. *Budetlianin nauki: Vospominaniia, Pisma, Stati, Stiji, Proza*. Hylea, 2012, pp. 103-105.
- . *Noveishaya russkaya poezii. Nabrosok perry: Postupy k Khlebnikovu*. Opojaz, 1921.
- . *Arte verbal, signo verbal, tiempo verbal*. FCE, 1992.
- Jakobson, Roman and Linda Waugh. *The Sound Shape of language*. Indiana University Press, 1979.
- Kalinin, Ilya. "Viktor Shklovsky vs. Roman Jakobson. Poetic Language or Poetic Function of Language." *Enthymema*, no. 19, 2017, pp. 342-351.
- Lass, Andrew. "Elective Affinity: Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss and his Antropologie Structurale." *Roman Jakobson: A Work in Progress*, edited by Tomaš Kubiček and Andrew Lass, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2014, pp. 37-54.

The Three Jakobsons  
Cristian Cámara Outes

- Kubiček, Tomáš. "Introduction." *Roman Jakobson: A Work in Progress*, edited by Tomáš Kubiček and Andrew Lass, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2014, pp. 5-10.
- Maira, Daniele. "Roman Jakobson contre Leo Spitzer. Militantisme critique et défense d'une méthode." *Romanische Studien*, no. 5, 2021, pp. 135-154.
- Mukařovský, Jan. *Signo, función y valor. Estética y semiótica del arte*. Plaza y Janés, 2000.
- Sériot, Patrick. *Structure et totalité. Les origines intellectuelles du structuralisme en Europe Centrale et Orientale*. PUF, 1999.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. *Escritos sobre arte y literatura*. Ediciones Asimétricas, 2021.
- Sütiste, Elin, Remo Gramigna, Jonathan Griffin and Silvi Salupere, editors. *(Re)considering Roman Jakobson*. University of Tartu Press, 2021.
- Tynyanov, Yuri. *El intervalo y otros ensayos*. Ediciones Asimétricas, 2018.