What is alive and what is dead in Jakobson
From codes to styles

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1. When we ask ourselves how relevant a great author of the past is today, we do not always do so from the same perspective. The author, for instance, may be making a comeback – becoming fashionable again. This, however, does not seem to be the case with Jakobson, and indeed all his most important contributions to the theory of literature (and perhaps also to linguistics) now seem irredeemably part of the past. The demise of structuralism, of which Jakobson was a protagonist, has now been decreed and its once prestigious name is now frequently preceded and devalued by the prefix *post*. As for literary theory, its golden age is over, and has been for some time. To be more specific: how many of us would feel they could argue in favour of the concept of 'literariness', or fully back the intransitivity of literary language, or the communication model (with its six elements), or entirely support the coupling between Saussurian language axes and the distinction between metaphor and metonymy? What remains valid today of Jakobson's most important theses? Have his pioneering enunciations really exhausted their power?

I believe that to answer this question with the consideration it requires we should start precisely by distinguishing between the pioneering power of some of these theses and their actual formulation, which may perhaps be faulted for showing a certain ingenuousness and excessive schematization. In any case, Jakobson's research deserves to be evaluated as a project, and an extraordinarily innovative one at that, and not as a conception that may have run its course.

2. About a century ago, in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, literary theory was invented. Contrary to what Antoine Compagnon states in a book that is very much at odds with the view I hope to support,[1] a theory is not a discourse aimed exclusively at general principles. Let us, instead, think of the way Barthes defined a theory as something that comprehends both a vision and certain techniques: according to this

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[1] Antoine Compagnon, *Le Démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commun*, Paris, Seuil, 1998.

conception a discourse on literature that is not accompanied by a tool box is a poetics (in the traditional sense) or only an ideology. Tomaševskij's well-known statement that «[i]t is possible to study electricity and yet not know what it is. [...] In studying phenomena one does not need an a priori definition of essences»[2] should be applied to the whole of Russian Formalism. Thus in literary theory, as it was practised by the Formalists and later by other scholars, there prevailed an experimental attitude. This remains true today: hypotheses are formulated, tools are devised and honed. Theory is an active building site where many people are at work with different hypotheses, sharing and discussing the results of their progress.

Such activity is undoubtedly guided by certain general principles, and because in Jakobson, as Peter Steiner has justly observed, continuity dominates, we encounter the same theses with slight variations.[3] The first, and perhaps most famous of these theses regards the concept of literariness.

A science of literature should study not literature but literariness, that which makes a work a *literary* work (*The New Russian Poetry*, 1919) or, in another formulation, that which «makes a verbal message a work of art».[4] To properly weigh up this thesis, we should first of all ask ourselves: what exactly are we looking for in what we are looking for?

Are we seeking a property, an essence? On the whole, Jakobson's proposal has been read in an Aristotelian sense, or rather through a standardised interpretation of Aristotle, as if the only type of definition accepted by him were one formulated through genre and specific differences, the classic example being that of man as a 'rational animal'. According to this line of reasoning, literariness is the specific difference that separates literary texts from other types of text, just as rationality is the difference that distinguishes men from the other species of animal.

Aristotle, however, believed that a definition can aim to grasp not the essence (that is, a hard core, composed of certain properties), but rather the *idion* (*proprium*). This frequently neglected notion is used to designate a non-essentialist universality: 'man is he who can laugh' or 'man is capable of learning grammar'. The *idion,* it may be seen, offers potentialities, virtualities, and not properties. Man is not 'he who laughs without interruption, continuously'; which would be the definition of a fool (as the Latin saying goes: *risus abundat in ore stultorum,* laughter abounds in the mouths of fools). What we should say is, rather, that man is capable of interpreting events in a humorous manner (indeed, if we consider carefully, he is not rational in the same way that a triangle is always triangular or 3 is always a prime number: rational means "capable of rationality"). It should also be remembered that Aristotle assigned a cog-

[2] In Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, p. 23.

[3] Peter Steiner, *op. cit*.

[4] Roman Jakobson, *Linguistics and poetics*, in *Language in Literature*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 63.

nitive potential to metaphor: a good metaphor is a sign of intelligence. It reveals truth with the same precision as that with which an archer hits a difficult target.

Therefore, to remain within an Aristotelian framework, we ought to view the notion of 'literariness' in a different light: a literary text is a text that *can* be read (and enjoyed) as a literary work. We could finally choose to view a literary text in its literariness; this is what Jakobson stated. The question he asked himself, and the question we should ask *ourselves* is: Why don't we do so?

Ex negativo, this is the fundamental issue around which all Russian Formalism gravitates. It is a question that may be formulated in two different ways. When he looked at the past, Jakobson was obliged to acknowledge that in universities literature had never been studied as an autonomous entity, but only indirectly (or tangentially). Today, after the heyday of literary theory has passed and its outcomes have been progressively pushed to the margin, we should ask ourselves, why we continue *not to study literature*? In many departments, the term *literature* itself is being progressively phased out and replaced by the term 'culture' (cultural studies).

The young Jakobson had compared the literary critic to a policeman who rushes on to a crime scene, grabs some objects that he finds lying around and then randomly starts stopping people, in the hope that this will turn out to be useful. I myself belong to a generation that deluded itself that it would be present at the death – at least in university research – of contextualism (of *contextual studies*, I might call them) and of what in Italy is called *contenutism*. This has not happened, and today the ranks of the avatars of Jakobson's policeman are by far the strongest, and the havoc they continue to wreak is to a large extent irreparable.

It is now easier to understand what is at stake when we talk of literariness. The search for a specific difference, understood as a particular property, is a naive aim from a philosophical point of view, and one we may easily take issue with. I do not, however, believe that Jakobson entirely believed he could draw a clear line separating literature from non-literature. This is proved by the article *What is poetry*?, where he states:

> The borderline dividing what is a work of poetry from what is not is less stable than the frontiers of the Chinese empire's territories. Novalis and Mallarmé regarded the alphabet as the greatest work of poetry. Russian poets have admired the poetic qualities of a wine list (Vjazemskij), an inventory of the tsar's clothes (Gogol), a timetable (Pasternak), and even a laundry bill (Krucenyx). How many poets now claim that reportage is a more artistic genre than the novel or short story?[5]

The apparent contradiction between the thesis of specificity and the awareness of the fragility of the borderlines disappears as soon as we learn to see in the notion of

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[5] Roman Jakobson, *What Is Poetry?*, in *Language in Literature*, cit., pp. 369-370.

literariness not the reflection of a property, but a methodological (or pragmatic) principle, that might be formulated as follows: «When you approach a literary work do not neglect form. However powerful are the emotions it may immediately awaken in you, remember that your emotions depend on the organisation of the text and on the processes through which it was put together. Bear in mind, also, that in the case of many complex texts (though not necessarily hermetic ones), the understanding of the technique used is almost indispensable if you wish to fully grasp their beauty». Thus understood, Jakobson's lesson appears to me both unsurpassed and unsurpassable.

3. What is *form*? The Formalists, as we know, used this term not to indicate the external covering, the package that enclosed a specific content, but rather the way a text was organised; not simply therefore its expression, its phonic texture, on which Jakobson nevertheless bestowed some extremely sophisticated analyses. Organisation is most certainly the outcome of certain devices, but this does not signify that it is easy to describe a device: it is not, as we shall see, easy to describe the way a metaphor functions, for example.

To state matters in more general terms, it is not enough to call attention to the 'linguisticity' of literary works: these are 'objects made of language', naturally, but what is language? It is not sufficient to say, with Jakobson, that «the set (*Einstellung*) toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language».[6] We must ask ourselves if a literary text can be envisaged through the concepts of message and code.

Our perspective on language has changed considerably over the last fifty years and has become both broader and more flexible. The communication model Jakobson proposed in *Linguistics and Poetics* (1960) now seems irredeemably out of date. No one, I believe, today would feel up to arguing that to *understand* means to *decode*. Pragmatics has taught us that, in daily life as in literature, to understand means to infer. Even in the simplest of situations, for example, when a waitress says to her colleague 'The *ham sandwich* is waiting for his check', comprehension is not literal, but depends on the implicit meaning and requires that an inference should be made. This does not imply that the rigid set of rules envisaged by the old linguistics through the notion of 'code' is entirely fanciful – to quote Steven Pinker, language is not «a rigid stick»; neither is it, however, «a wet noodle».[7] The literary text is a strange combination of strict and flexible rules. As Mukarovskij stated in the '30s, it is both an artefact and a virtual object. It is a *dynamic greatness* that expands through good interpretation and that exists in what Bakhtin called *the great time*.

In addition to the criticisms that stem from pragmatic linguistics, there is there-

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[6] Jakobson, *Linguistics and Poetics*, cit., p. 69.

[7] Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, 2007, London, Penguin Books, p. 123.

fore another important reason to scale down the code model. If a literary text were a message, produced through a set of codes, it would remain a static greatness and would never develop into a dynamic greatness. The code is an insurmountable obstacle for the semantic dynamism that is typical of literary works and works of art in general. On this issue, those who agree with Bakhtin must necessarily differ from those who agree with Jakobson.

4. I have outlined some of the reasons why we must distance ourselves from Jakobson. If we are to rediscover the more stimulating aspects of his thought, we must discard a set of schematisms which retrospectively, however, were probably unavoidable. I should like to touch briefly on two further points.

The first regards the relationship between literature and intransitive aesthetics. The thesis according to which literature is not a referential language most certainly derives from the idea of the primacy of form in literature; the same cannot be said for the thesis of intransitivity. Nietzsche and Freud taught us to rediscover literature as a mode of knowledge, whose object is not actuality but possibility. *Literature is the interpretation of (existential) possibilities.* It shows us the human condition as a battleground where superior possibilities and inferior possibilities clash. A single example may serve to illuminate this point: it is the plane upon which the possibility represented by Antigone clashes with the possibility represented by Creon (but also with that embodied by Ismene).

Therefore, to state that literature is knowledge but that it is not a referential language is the same as saying that knowledge must not be envisaged only as *correspondence*, and that truth is not simply *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. Moreover, literature shows us that a conception based on properties (I call this a 'property-based conception') does not lead us far astray, if the object of this knowledge is human beings. It is the paradoxes of desire, the differences in styles of thought; it is possibilities and not properties that define us in our specificity.

This is not, of course, the proper place to develop this point as it would deserve. I shall limit myself to pointing out that to engage with existential possibilities does not imply a return to 'content'; on the contrary it calls for great attention to the text, in particular to the way in which a literary text builds identities. 'Form' is also the process through which complex identities are fashioned. It is, in other words, the logical-ontological shape of identity.[8]

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[8] A more systematic account of my research programme may be found in GIOVANNI BOTTIROLI, *La ragione flessibile. Modi d'essere e stili di pensiero*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2013. See also GIOVANNI BOTTIROLI, *Identity Exists Only in its Modes: The Flexible Subject and the Interpretative Mind against Semi-Cognitive "Sciences"*, «Comparatismi», 1, 2016, web, ultimo accesso: 3 marzo 2018, http://www.ledijournals.com/ojs/index.php/comparatismi/article/view/712.

Finally, I should like to consider Jakobson's conception of rhetoric, as set out in his essay on *Two aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances.9* This Janus-like text looks both to the future and to the past. As is well known, it contains one of Jakobson's more enduring theoretical proposals, the coupling of the two axes of language (the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic) with the two rhetorical processes of metaphor and metonymy. From a certain point of view, this was a powerfully original text in that it reinterpreted the old rhetoric through Saussure's linguistics. However, beneath its apparent novelty, it in fact reproposed the traditional conception of metaphor as a figure of substitution. Intriguingly, a truly innovative take emerged in those very years in an article by Max Black in which metaphor is described as a process of interaction, whose smallest unit is not the single word but an utterance. We therefore have interaction – reciprocal action, though Black, not without good reason, mainly describes the effect of the latter on the former.[10]

The first innovative feature of this new theory is that metaphor may be seen as a thought mechanism, in an eminent sense. No structuralist would have denied that there is thought in metaphor: there are no signifiers without signifieds, and where there are signifieds there is evidently also a thought process. But if thought merely performs an operation of substitution there is no possibility of producing knowledge. A word in itself is neither true nor false; at least two words have to be connected to produce a true or a false utterance. When it is placed within the framework of an utterance, metaphor is freed of its ornamental connotations. It would then be claimed as a thought process by cognitive linguistics.

But does all this imply a dislocation of metaphor from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic axis? An exchange of places with synecdoche, as hypothesised by Ricoeur?[11] No, it is rather the whole conception of language that has to be rethought.

It is easier to see the need for this if we consider the excess of schematisation in Jakobson's model: here antonyms are placed on the paradigmatic axis (as are all figures of opposition), while metonymy, which is confused with synecdoche, is placed on the other axis. Lack of space allows me to give only two examples of metonymy that can in no way be assimilated to synecdoche. The first is from Sartre's *Les mots*:

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[9] Roman Jakobson, *Two aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances*, in *Fundamentals of Language*, edited by Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, s'Gravenhage, Mouton, 1956, pp. 55-82: 56, also published in Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, edited by Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 115-133.

[10] See Max Black, *Metaphor*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», 55, 1954, pp. 273-294.

[11] See Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

> If someone had crept into my head, which was open to all the winds, he would
> have come upon a few busts, a stray multiplication table and the rule of three,
> thirty-two counties with the chief town of each but not the sub-prefecture, a
> rose called *rosarosaerosaerosamrosarosa*, some historical and literary monu-
> ments, a few polite maxims engraved on stiles, and sometimes, like a scarf of
> mist hovering over this sad garden, a sadistic reverie.[12]

The second example, which is very famous, is from Borges's Chinese Encyclopedia,
where «animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed
ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones,
(g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble
as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's
hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that
resemble flies from a distance».[13]

In both cases, the textual (albeit micro-textual) dimension of metonymy is undeniable.

Let us therefore try to rethink rhetorical mechanisms not as distributed along two
axes, but rather as operations that may be carried out by the speaker. All these belong
to the paradigmatic axis, from where the speaker each time makes his choice. How
should we envisage the paradigmatic axis? Should we think of it as represented by
one of the Cartesian axes?

I should like to put forward an interpretation which is different both conceptually
and graphically and which I hope will valorise the conception of the *langue* (*lan-
guage*) as virtuality: this is one of the definitions of *langue* that we find in Saussure
– the other is 'a set of collective habits'. My idea may be visualised in the following
diagram, which I have called *the rain of styles*:[14]
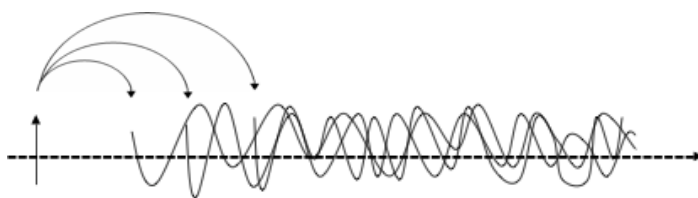
In Jakobson's model – which both simplifies Saussure's idea and hardens its con-
tours – rigidity rules. In the essay we have been looking at, he states that «the

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12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*, New York, George Braziller, 1964, p. 209.

13 Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, transl. by Ruth L. C. Simms, Austin,
University of Texas Press, 2000, p. 103.

14 See Bottiroli, *La ragione flessibile*, cit., p. 261.

speaker and the listener have at their disposal more or less the same "filing cabinet of *prefabricated* representations"».[15]

In my diagram the paradigmatic axis breaks up into a plurality of styles of thought, and the intertwining of different styles generates texts (there are obviously many ways in which such intertwinings may or may not take place). I indicate three styles: the first seeks to create univocal semiotic units and uses rigid rules – this is the *separative* style; the second tends to bring together and superimpose – this is the *confusive* style (that of *calembours* and of puns, which reaches its greatest heights in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*); lastly, there is the style of flexibility, which distinguishes without rigidly separating, capable of binding and interweaving without, however, producing a paralysis – this is the *distinctive* style. These are, so to speak, the inaugural possibilities of language. All these styles are styles of thought.

All this may strike us as being very far removed from Jakobson's model, and indeed this is so; at least if we consider only the first part of the essay *Two aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances*. But the gap becomes smaller if we consider the last part, in which Jakobson describes a textual perspective, where the most important rhetorical figures become styles. He discusses the primacy of the metaphorical process in the romantic and symbolist schools, and that of metonymy in realism. He extends these two stylistic principles to painting (Cubism being, in this interpretation, based on synecdoche, and surrealism on metaphor), as well as to the cinema, etc.

It is a pity that Jakobson did not develop this intuition: it would have led him to scale down his code model and recognise in the plurality of styles the principle governing a work of art. Style then would no longer have oscillated between individual and collective expression (this is the way it has been seen, not just in the past but also recently) and would have begun to be seen as the positive driving force at the basis of fruitful conflicts.

It is not enough to know how a car works (to quote Šklovskij): we must also be capable of getting into it and starting the engine. To enter into the dimension of styles means to turn on the engine. This is language in action (*Language in operation*) – and this phrase, which is also the title of a 1964 essay by Jakobson, proves that his research can no longer be reduced to formulations which may in the past have encountered much approval but no longer represent the more vital aspects of his thought.

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[15] Jakobson, *Two aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances*, in Id., *Language in Literature*, cit., p. 97.