

TWO LETTERS FROM CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Remo Faccani

Dedicated to the memory of Roman Jakobson
on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his death.

1. The 1970s and early 1980s were for me years of intensive correspondence with many intellectuals of different nationalities, although among them clearly prevailed scholars either from Russia or of Russian descent.¹ My correspondents generally showed a remarkable interest in this dialog, albeit limited to the written page, and our relations sometimes extended well beyond the period in question.

It would make little sense to list here all the people with whom I exchanged letters. Therefore, I will just mention those friends whose letters were most numerous and rewarding: Mixail Gasparov, Aleksandr Gorfunkel', Eruxim Krejnovič, Jurij Lotman, Uku Masing, Nikita Meščerskij, Èd-xjam Tenišev, Vladimir Toporov, Vladislav Xolševnikov, Stefan Żółkiewski.

I have omitted the name of Roman Jakobson because our communication was on the whole rather sporadic and mostly dictated by chance. Moreover, I am a terrible archivist, and among the letters, all in English, received from Cambridge, Mass., only two have been kept. After about thirty years it is impossible for me to fully reconstruct the development of my correspondence with Jakobson and to recollect precisely the circumstances which initiated and maintained it.

At any rate, I believe that these two surviving letters, despite their brevity, are worth being published, at least for the possible remarks and ob-

¹ I speak about these personal events only for information – without any claim of providing material for the 'annals' of Slavic studies in Italy.

servations they demand or imply. They were both written on Harvard University headed notepaper (Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 301 Boylston Hall) and are dated March 1, 1977, and May 22, 1979.

Here are the two Jakobson texts, the first entirely handwritten. I have silently corrected a few minor oversights and added some punctuation marks; I have furthermore put in square brackets the integrations I deemed necessary.

Letter 1

3.1.77

Dear Mr Faccani,

Thank you for the interesting Marignolli quotation.
 Could you give me a bibliographical reference to the It.[alian] version of my *Comunicazione verbale*?

1) A. Voznesenskij, "Oza", VII, *Molodaja gvardija*, Oct. 1964, p. 23;
 – Zato buduščee dlja tebja dostoverno i bezuslovno.
 "Zavtra my pošli v les", govoriš' ty.
 U, kakoj les zašumel nazavtra!

2) S. Kirsanov, bilingual edition (Gallimard, 1968).

Poèmes,

Title of the poem: Odnadždy zavtra, p. 106 (trad. de L. Godel, p. 107:

"Ja našelsja odnadždy zavtra!", p. 108.	Une fois demain. Je suis retrouvé une fois demain! [p.] 109).
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3) Gleb Glinka, Poems, New York, 1972.

"Bylo zavtra",
 Diko-stranno!
 Možet, avtor
 Inostrannyj?

Yours sincerely
 Roman Jakobson

Letter 2

May 22, 1979

Gentile Collega,²

Thank you for your letter of April 20. I will do my best to send a brief contribution to the Kručenyx issue of *Il Verri*, but I cannot do it before September because I have urgent commitments for this summer.

Kručenyx was my dear friend from 1914 to the end of his life for whose poetry and original character I have always had a genuine appreciation.³ As to his *500 novyx ostrot*, I have never seen neither this pamphlet nor its review by an alleged K. Jakobson, and, of course, needless to say, I have nothing in common neither with this review nor with the reviewer.⁴

Yours sincerely
Roman Jakobson

2. The “Marignolli quotation” referred to by Jakobson in the first letter is the following: “Baba, id est pater, et mama, id est mater in omni ydiomate mundi...”⁵ The Tuscan minorite Giovanni dei Marignolli, who was sent to the Orient by Benedict XII in 1338, formulates this theory in the recollec-

² This Italian expression is Jakobson’s own.

³ In the very same 1979 Jakobson wrote a short article, *From Aljagrov’s Letters*, containing a letter he sent to Aleksej Eliseevič (Kručenyx) precisely in 1914. The letter was unpublished for sixty-five years – in fact for seventy, since the article was first printed in the volume in honor of Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism in Retrospect*, ed. R. L. Jackson and S. Rudy, New Haven, 1984 (and was then reprinted in R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, VII, ed. S. Rudy, Berlin-New York-Amsterdam, 1985, pp. 357-61). “R. Aljagrov” was a pseudonym occasionally used by Jakobson in his youth. Erlich, now in his ninety-third year, taught at Yale University from 1961 until his retirement and was deeply attached to the Harvard Russian Research Center.

⁴ The repeated use of double negation, not admitted in English but, conversely, obligatory in Russian, is here most astonishing. What if Jakobson, over eighty, unconsciously obeyed to the call of his native language?

⁵ *Sinica franciscana*, vol. I (*Itinera et relationes fratrum minorum saeculi XIII- XIV*), ed. A. van den Wyngaert O.F.M., Quaracchi-Florence, 1929, p. 538.

tions of his Asiatic travel composed in 1350s after his return to Europe – to be exact in the notes about his stay in Ceylon. I am hardly capable now of justifying my interest in that kind of reading. I was probably looking for direct or indirect data to extend the ethnolinguistic research I started a few years before in an article on the differences between male and female speech in some communities and cultures of Eurasia.⁶

What prompted me to tell Jakobson about Marignolli's remark was the vogue, still lively in those years, of the study of language universals and Jakobson's article *Why 'mama' and 'papa'?* (1960),⁷ that dwells in particular upon the possible origin and reasons of the "striking convergence" in the phonological structure of terms for father and mother "throughout historically unrelated languages".

Jakobson's paper *Verbal Communication* was first published in a special issue of "Scientific American" (vol. 227, no. 3, Sept. 1972),⁸ and exactly a year later it appeared in the Italian edition of that journal.⁹ The closing paragraph of the article was imprinted in my memory because the author had quoted very peculiar excerpts and lines of modern Russian poets obviously presented to the Italian readers as a 'second translation'. I wanted to know the Russian originals and their references. This wish continued 'floating' in my mind (I should have also made some notes on a jotter). I was going to write to Jakobson on a different occasion anyway; thus, I seized the opportunity to ask him directly.

In his article Jakobson points out that

the analysis of grammatical transformations and their import should include the poetic function of language, because the core of this function is to push transformations into the foreground. It is the purposeful poetic use of lexical and grammatical tropes and figures that brings the creative power of language to its summit. Such a marked innovation as the inverse temporal perspective recently used by three Russian poets independently of one another is hardly fortuitous."The future

⁶ R. Faccani, *L'antitesi di pronuncia maschile e pronuncia femminile in Eurasia e il suo sfondo etnologico*, "Annali di Ca' Foscari", XIV (1975) 3, pp. 151-64.

⁷ Reprinted in R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, I, The Hague, 1962, pp. 538-45.

⁸ Reprinted in R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, VII, cit., pp. 81-92.

⁹ R. Jakobson, *La comunicazione verbale*, "Le Scienze", vol. IX, no. 61 (Sept. 1973), pp. 51-56.

for you is trustworthy and definite. You say: Tomorrow we went to the forest" (A. Voznesenskij); "It happened that I found myself tomorrow" (S. Kirsanov); "It was tomorrow" (G. Glinka).

Upon the receipt of Jakobson's answer I easily found the 'lyric journal' by Andrej Voznesenskij, *Oza (Tetrad', najdenaja v tumbočke dubnenskoj gostinicy)*, where between pages 23-24 there was the fragment that had drawn the attention of the scholar:

...Prošloe dlja tebja ešče možet izmenit'sja i nastupat'. "Napoleon, – govorju ja, – oderžal pobeđu pod Austerlicem". Ty otvečaeš': "Posmotrim!"

Zato buduščee dlja tebja dostoverno i bezuslovno.

"Zavtra my pošli v les", – govoriš' ty. U, kakoj les zašumel nazavtra!¹⁰ Do six por u tebja iz levoj tufel'ki ne vytrjaxnulas' suxaja xvojnaja igoločka.

Tvoi tufli ostronosye – takie uže ne nosjat. "Ešče ne nosjat", – smeeš'ja ty...

As regards the lines by Semen Kirsanov (1906-1972), who in his youth was strongly linked with Majakovskij and with futurist Majakovskijan trend and later also was known for his formal originality and linguistic experimentation, we find them in the final part of his poem *Odnaždy zavtra*:

...Ogljanis',
tam
odin iz buduščix ja,
rojas' po bukinistam,
obnaružil pustoj pereplet,
zatesavšijsja meždu tomami
Djuma ili Sartra,
bez stranic, bez zaglav'ja, bez avtora...

Prygaet s vos'mogo etaža,
bežit po prospektu, razmaxivaja bumagoju,
kričit: "Tovarišči, èto ž ja!
Ja našelsja
odnaždy zavtra!"

Actually, this poem was written in the early 1960s and became the eponymous text of a whole poetry collection by Kirsanov (*Odnaždy zavtra*, Moscow 1964).¹¹

¹⁰ Italics mine.

¹¹ Out of curiosity, it is worth remembering that in 1986 the Russian rock band "Dia-

Gleb Glinka (1903-1998) belonged for some time to “Pereval” literary group. A volunteer into Soviet army after Hitler’s invasion, he was taken prisoner by the Germans and detained until the end of the war. After liberation he settled at first in Belgium and later in the United States where he spent the rest of his life. There he published works on history of Russian literature and criticism, as well as some poetry collections including *Bylo zavtra* (New York, 1972). So, I believe that *Bylo zavtra* is the real title of the collection mentioned by Jakobson. The word “Poems” in Jakobson’s letter, even though capitalized, should not be taken as a title, but as a general indication of ‘poetic compositions’.

3. The second of Jakobson’s letters is primarily concerning my proposal for him to write an article for a monographic issue of the journal “il verri” devoted in particular to *zaum*, namely to the ‘transrational’ (or ‘trans-sense’) current of Russian futurism. The promoter of this initiative was Marzio Marzaduri, an exceptional connoisseur of the literary activity of the poets who moved within the orbit of Russian futurism.

The idea was eventually realised in a double special issue to which Jakobson did not send his contribution.¹² However, if my memory does not fail me, it was Jakobson’s offer to translate some pages on glossolalia extracted from the recently published work of which he was a co-author.¹³ Among the ‘historic’ documents related to Russian futurism, I thought it was worthwhile to insert at least a portion of the letter, unpublished until 1940, that seventeen-year-old Jakobson wrote to *Viktor Vladimirovič Xlebnikov* in the spring of 1914.¹⁴

log” gave the very same title to a successful album of songs based on Kirsanov’s poems (cf., e. g., <http://music.greenwater.ru/band6993>).

¹² “il verri”, 29-30 and 31-32 (1983).

¹³ R. Jakobson, L. Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language*, Bloomington-London, 1979; “il verri”, 29-30, cit., pp. 50-56. We could ask ourselves, I think, whether the article *From Aljagrov’s Letters* written by Jakobson, as we know, in 1979 (see above, footnote 3) was to be published in “il verri” and was then included in the *Festschrift* dedicated to Victor Erlich (although in his paper Jakobson refers exclusively to Russian futurism in its ‘transrational’ variant).

¹⁴ See “il verri”, 31-32, p. 71. The original text was first printed in *Majakovskij. Materialy i issledovanija*, ed. V. O. Percov and M. I. Serebrjanskij, Moscow, 1940, pp. 385-6

The budding scholar, still a student of Moscow University, Jakobson was evidently referring to a conversation with the ‘great Viktor-Velimir’, eleven years his senior and already on the way to becoming a living legend of the Russian literary modernism. Xlebnikov had said to Jakobson that “our [i.d. Russian?] alphabet is too poor for poetry”, and the use of it would lead inevitably to “a full stop”: the only way out of this *impasse* was “numbers”, or recourse to the tools of mathematics. In his letter to Xlebnikov, Jakobson objected that “numbers are a double-edged weapon – extremely concrete and yet extremely abstract, arbitrary and fatally precise”, etc. Thus, he made a polite request which constituted a kind of friendly challenge to the poet: “you are familiar with numbers; therefore, if you recognize a paradox in the poetry of numbers which is tempting, even though generally unacceptable, I beg you to try to provide me with an example of lines of this kind, however small.”

For his part, teenage Jakobson confided to Xlebnikov that he recently had made “a singular discovery”. He wrote: “This is my discovery: the intertwining of letters of the alphabet, something like musical chords. This provides the concurrence of two or more letters and also a multiplicity of graphic combinations which are able to establish different relationships between one letter and other”. Such a device, according to Jakobson, could “enrich” the texture of the verse and “open up new pathways” to poetry.

In Jakobson’s letter to Xlebnikov there were one or two passages which were not easy to interpret. I wanted to discuss this subject with Jakobson. But because his commitments were undoubtedly made more onerous by his age, I consulted rather his wife, Krystyna Pomorska, as I had had previously occasion to do so. Pomorska was an admirable scholar and correspondent whose wonderful courteous letters on thin, light blue paper I still cherish. I never thought of asking her whether Jakobson had by any chance mentioned receiving a reply from the author of *Šaman i Venera*. Neither did I think of asking Jakobson, through her, if the fascination which numbers and, more generally, the coupling of poetry and mathematics exercised on Xlebnikov did not also derive, through more or less secret underground pathways, from the fascination for the symbolism of numbers so

(and reprinted in N. Xardžiev, V. Trenin, *Poëtičeskaja kul’tura Majakovskogo*, Moscow, 1970, p. 37).

widely cultivated during the Middle Ages in Europe and, with perhaps even greater refinement, in the East.¹⁵

4. The second letter from Jakobson is notable for the warm, affectionate homage he pays to Aleksej Kručenyx, who had died in Moscow about ten years earlier. (The scholar, however, had already included the *zaumnik*, while he was still alive, on the list of representatives of the generation born between 1880 and 1995 who had made a fundamental contribution to the “veritable new flowering” of Russian poetry in the first third of the 20th century).¹⁶

On the other hand, it is understandable why Jakobson forcefully rejected the supposition (or the suspicion, if one prefers) of his collaboration on Kručenyx’s pamphlet *500 novyx ostrot i kalamburov Puškina* (Moscow, 1924). This conjecture had been made by Serena Vitale in her book *Per conoscere l'avanguardia russa* (Milan, 1979); and Marzio Marzaduri, who was going to review it, entreated me to consult Jakobson.

The review appeared in the journal “Belfagor”, XXXV/6 (1980); in it Marzaduri ascribed to Vitale the merit of modifying the conventional image of Russian futurism. Almost as a marginal note, Marzaduri stated that he had the feeling that Vitale had made “a singular slip, attributing to Roman Jakobson a paper on ‘sdvig’” (a term generally translated into English with ‘shift’ and applied to literary theory for the first time, if I am not mistaken, by Kručenyx himself). The article published in Kručenyx’s pamphlet bore in fact the name of a certain K. Jakobson;¹⁷ and Marzaduri

¹⁵ Cf. the *Zahlenkomposition* focused by E. R. Curtius in his book *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern-Munich, 1961), pp. 491 ff.; but see especially certain Islamic cultural phenomena: e. g., the Sufi movement of hurufism. In his study *Poëtika i matematika (xurufizm v srednevekovoj vostočnoj poëzii i ego matematičeskoe raskrytie)*, Baku, 1979, p. 182, the orientalist A. El’brus writes that “hurufism opened ample opportunities for the poetic creative work symbolics, coding rich and highly ramified philosophical content expressed by means of logical semantics of letters, points and numbers” (I quote verbatim from the ‘conclusion’ in English of El’brus’ essay).

¹⁶ See Jakobson’s *Notes préliminaires sur les voies de la poésie russe*, written in 1964 for the anthology *La poésie russe*, ed. E. Triolet, Paris 1965 (repr. in R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, V, The Hague-Paris-New York, 1979, pp. 227-36).

¹⁷ According to Vitale, it was evidently a misprint (*K* instead of *R*).

thought that “the tedious writing and the lame argumentation [of its author] ... seem to have little in common with the vivid tongue and exact, clear style of Roman Jakobson”.

5. My commentary on Jakobson’s letters could end here, but the ‘personal’ (it would be excessive to say ‘autobiographical’) tone I have given to these pages leads me to recount, in the way of a musical *coda*, a final epistolary episode.¹⁸ In the late 1970s, I decided to turn my hand to a new Italian translation of Majakovskij’s long poem *Oblako v štanax* which was to be amply annotated with regard to its content, form and imagery.¹⁹

I had an urge to learn about and gain a deeper understanding of, among other things, the futurist formulations relating to the phonetics of the Russian language, above all to the use of certain consonant clusters at the origin of the phenomena which were called ‘sound-image’, ‘sound-writing’, ‘hard texture’ (*tugaja faktura*) and so on. I happened to find in the book by Jakobson and Pomorska, *Dialogues* (Paris, 1980, p. 31)²⁰ the following words: “Si Rimbaud, tout d’abord, écrivit une ‘ode’ aux voyelles, D.[avid] Burljuk (1882-1967), poète et expérimenteur russe d’avant-garde, composa, en revanche, des vers dont le ‘héros’ était ‘le son consonantique, ce preux fougueux’.”²¹ The Russian text of this line reads: “Soglasnyj zvuk – gorjaščij muž”. It was printed in a magnificent futurist publication, *Strelec*, I (Petrograd, 1915); but, frankly, we are speaking of a rather poor line from a rather weak poem (“Prostranstvo – glasnyx / Glasnyx – vremja!..”, etc.).

¹⁸ A German art critic defines the German artist Karl-Theo Stammer “ein fanatischer Notierer seiner eigenen Existenz” – a very effective characterization which unfortunately (or fortunately) is far from reflecting my case.

¹⁹ The idea was carried out only after an interval of several years (V. Majakovskij, *La nuvola in calzoni*, ed. R. Faccani, Venice, 1989).

²⁰ The Russian original, *Besedy*, appeared two years later in Jerusalem.

²¹ This phonosymbolic interpretation of the letters of the alphabet perhaps goes back to Jakob Grimm’s statement which, in agreement, so to speak, with the language of *Dialogues*, I quote from French translation: “... les voyelles sont évidemment de nature féminine, et les consonnes de nature masculine...” (J. Grimm, *De l’origine du langage*, Paris, 1859, p. 38; it is an *opuscule* presented by E. Renan); but cf. also Konstantin Bal’mont’s essay, *Poèzija i volšebstvo*, Moscow, 1915.

Nevertheless, before I learned about it, thanks, if I remember rightly, to Marzaduri, I called on Vladimir Markov from the University of California in Los Angeles, a well-known historian of Russian modernism and a very fine poet in his own right. (Our correspondence had begun as early as in the mid-1960s.)²² In a letter from London dated December 1983 Markov, having traced backwards from the French translation to the possible Russian original for Burljuk's line, suggested an iambic tetrameter of extraordinary, almost Puškinian incisiveness and elegance: "Soglasnyj zvuk, sej vitjaz' pylkij."²³

6. The western linguists whom I know generally admit that they are often nearly completely deaf to poetry. At the same time, they tend to recognize that sensitivity for and interest in poetry and poetic language constitutes a specific (and in a certain sense 'unique') trait of their colleagues of Russian origin and training. This Russian scholarly feature can be traced back to the 'linguistics and poetics' theme: it took its manifesto, as it were, from the 'historic' essay of the same title by Jakobson, which is intended to answer the question: "What makes a verbal message a work of art?"²⁴

It is, therefore, no wonder that Jakobson at the end of his article *Verbal Communication* underlines the "poetic function" of language and the "inverse temporal perspective" by using three quotations from Russian poets of the 20th century which the scholar appears to link with a precise mathematical conception of time. Indeed, he points out (and these are the last lines of the paper) that "In a letter dated March, 21, 1955, four weeks be-

²² At that time, I did not know the dramatic events which had led him from the banks of the Neva river (he was born in Petrograd in 1920) to the American shore of the Pacific.

²³ One can wonder whether here Markov has intended to present a playful poetic variation, but in his letter the fragment that frames the line he has 'reconstructed' make this hypothesis clearly unfounded.

²⁴ R. Jakobson, *Linguistics and Poetics*, in *Selected Writings*, III, The Hague-Paris-New York, 1981, pp. 18-51. This study was first published in the volume that collects the results of a conference held at Indiana University in 1958 – *Style in Language*, ed. Th. A. Sebeok, New York-London, 1960, pp. 350-77.

fore his death, Einstein wrote: ‘The separation between past, present, and future has only the meaning of an illusion, albeit a tenacious one’²⁵.

In conclusion, the two letters from Cambridge, Mass., also evoke, in their own way, the motif of the poet’s dialogue with time or, better, with *space-time*. Let me, then, while these notes are fading out, draw on a novel by Don DeLillo²⁶ – and allow myself to make a slight alteration, a substitution of words which is not so different from the one the great Russian-American linguist and philologist Roman Jakobson seems to have allowed himself in his quotation from Einstein: “There has to be an imaginary point, a nonplace where language intersects with our perceptions of time and space, and *the poet*²⁷ is a stranger at this crossing...”

²⁵ It was a letter to the widow and the son of the ‘Swiss-Italian’ (and precisely, if I am not mistaken, ‘Swiss-Triestine’) engineer Michele Besso (1873-1955) who was a close friend of Albert Einstein and his colleague at the patent office in Bern. In Dennis Overbye’s, *Einstein in Love: A Scientific Romance*, New York-London, 2000, p. 377, the physicist takes leave of Besso’s relatives with these words: “So in quitting this strange world he [Michele] has once again preceded me by a little. That doesn’t mean anything. For those of us who believe in physics, this separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, however tenacious”. (The discrepancy between the two quotations is certainly due to Einstein’s writing in German his correspondence with the Bessos.) I remark that Jakobson attributes a more general value to Einstein’s sentence by making a principle of modern physics into a fruitful, creative element of his own ‘philosophy’

²⁶ D. DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, London, 2001, p. 99.

²⁷ The noun ‘poet’ takes the place of the pronoun ‘he’ which, in DeLillo’s novel, refers to a sort of phantasmal character.