R. Jakobson and K. Pomorska
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FOREWORD

The dialogues that make up this book explore the intellectual biography of Roman Jakobson, one of the seminal scholars of our century. The picture of Jakobson's thought and work that emerges from these pages is the result of a collaboration between Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska, professor of Russian and Literature at MIT. Although the subject matter of the dialogues is Jakobson's career, the form in which the career is explored is largely due to Pomorska. In modern times it has been somewhat uncommon to deal with matters of serious scholarly and scientific concerns in the form of a dialogue, in part, no doubt, because the form is hard to control. On the evidence of this book Pomorska would appear to be a born master of this form. She knows when to press a point and when to give free rein to her subject, where further explanations are required and where additional elucidation would just add noise or tedium. Above all, her unparalleled knowledge of Jakobson's career, and of the intellectual and social background against which the career unfolded, enables her to focus the dialogues on the most pertinent issues and to elicit from her interlocutor informative answers that deeply penetrate the subject matter.

Jakobson's primary field of research is linguistics, the science of human language. In general linguistics, Jakobson's work of the 1920s and 1930s laid much of the foundation of structuralist phonology, the dominant trend of that time. The crowning achievement of this work was Jakobson's theory of distinctive features, which promulgated the idea that speech sounds (phonemes) are not atomic entities devoid of further analysis, but are rather complexes of phonetic properties (the distinctive fea-

tures). This radical idea, though initially resisted by contemporary scholars, has now become the standard view, taught to students in the first few weeks of an introductory course, often without reference to its discoverer. Jakobson's second major contribution to general linguistics consisted in showing that the process of language acquisition by young children was in many important ways the mirror image of different stages of loss of language in patients with cerebral lesions. In his widely read study *Child Language, Aphasia and Phonological Universals* (1941, English translation 1968) Jakobson not only established previously unsuspected connections between acquisition and language loss, but also brought out important parallels between changes observed in language acquisition and loss and phonological change in languages that are genetically related as well as in those that are geographically contiguous.

Like most workers in linguistics, Jakobson has devoted much effort to the elucidation of particular points in the grammar of individual languages. He has written outstanding studies on languages as different as Gilyak (1957), a paleo-Siberian language spoken on the Sakhalin peninsula, and ancient Greek (1937). His major area of concentration, however, has been the Slavic languages, in particular, his native Russian, and Czech, the chief language of the country where Jakobson spent most of the years between the two World Wars. His analysis of the Russian verb (1948) not only solved a puzzle that had defeated generations of scholars, but also illustrated a new approach to such problems, which a decade later was to provide the model for generative phonology.

Outside of linguistics proper, Jakobson has made major contributions to studies of the history and culture of the

Slavic-speaking peoples, on the one hand, and to the study of literature and to literary criticism, on the other. In the former he has devoted a number of studies to the career of the ninth-century Thessalonian brothers, Ss. Cyril and Methodius, who firmly established Christianity among the Slavs and in the process established ideological positions on national self-determination that have continued to play a role in the political and cultural history of Eastern Europe to the present time.

During the Second World War, Jakobson organized in New York a project for the study of the *Igor Tale*, a twelfth-century Russian epic poem, which A. Mazon of the Collège de France had declared a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century forgery. The collective work on the *Igor Tale* published in 1948 not only fully established the authenticity of the poem, but also provided a completely new perspective on the history, the culture, and the literature of medieval Russia.

The study of form in literature has been a major interest of Jakobson's from the very beginning of his scientific career. In a number of studies going back to his monograph on Czech verse (1923), Jakobson has elucidated the role that different phonetic properties of the language play in verse. Perhaps of the greatest importance here have been his studies of meter. In particular, his discovery (1933) that the meter of the Serbian epic verse is based not on the regular distribution of stress, length, or syllabic structure, but on the presence or absence of word boundaries in specific positions in the verse. This was a novel suggestion at the time and provoked considerable resistance (and ridicule) from certain conservative scholars. Subsequent work, however, has fully vindicated Jakobson's

hypothesis and has shown that word-boundary placement is basic not only to other Serbian verse forms but also to verse composed in other languages, in particular, in certain other Slavic and Baltic languages.

During the 1950s and 1960s Jakobson turned his attention to the role played in the structure of verse by morphological entities of language. In a series of studies now conveniently collected in the third volume of his *Selected Writings* (1981), Jakobson showed that such abstract elements as grammatical case, number, person, tense, and verbal aspect are distributed in particular poems in accordance with strict rules. These regularities are, therefore, every bit as important in our esthetic response to a poem as the more obvious formal devices of meter, rhyme, and assonance.

Jakobson must surely be counted among the most insightful literary critics of our time. He has written some of the best practical criticism published in the twentieth century, notably his appreciations of the Russian poets Khlebnikov, Majakovskij, and Pasternak, his studies of the Czech poet Mácha, as well as his commentaries on poems by Baudelaire, Poe, Shakespeare, Brecht, and others.

Last but not least, Jakobson is one of the great teachers of his generation. He is able to convey much new information to students as well as to inspire them to undertake projects that test the limits of their intellectual powers, to push themselves much harder than they had ever believed possible, and to succeed in researches that others had abandoned as too difficult. It is hardly surprising in view of this that during his two decades at Harvard Jakobson trained almost every major Slavicist active in the United States today.

In one of the dialogues Jakobson remarks that he grew up among painters. This fact, to my knowledge without parallel among major figures in literary studies and linguistics, is of fundamental importance for an understanding of Jakobson's intellectual makeup. The painters among whom Jakobson grew up were a rather extraordinary group: they constituted what has become known as the Russian avant-garde and included such artists as Filonov, Kandinsky, Larionov, Malevich, and Matjushin. The English critic John Berger has remarked that in the few years before and after 1917 this group gave rise to "a movement in the Russian visual arts which, for its creativity, confidence, engagement in life and synthesizing power, has so far remained unique in the history of modern art" (*Art and Revolution*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1969, p. 29). This creativity, confidence, engagement in life and synthesizing power have remained constant factors in all of Jakobson's life and work. These traits enabled him to overcome the many disasters of our century and served to re-establish him each time he was forced by the history of our time to change his domicile and to start all over again. And it is these qualities that manifest themselves all through the pages that follow, as Jakobson discusses matters as disparate as the internal structure of phonemes and the literary politics of V. I. Lenin, the theories of the American philosopher C. S. Peirce, and the film *Last Year in Marienbad*. When asked to justify such ventures all across the map of human experience, Jakobson has responded that since language is central to all human endeavor, all this, and much more, is legitimately within

the purview of his science, concluding with a paraphrase of the well-known words of the Latin poet Terence: "Linguista sum: linguistici nihil a me alienum puto."

Morris Halle

BY WAY OF PREFACE

The invitation to participate in the collection *Dialogues* and to sketch in this framework our personal experiences as explorers naturally elicited from both of us a deeply sympathetic response.

In language and in the science of language the presence of an interlocutor is of fundamental importance: the mastery of language is a dialogue, and the development of language is also a dialogue. The account of the relations between individual and collective contributions to the science of language and of its artistic transformation gains in productivity when submitted to discussion. Linguists have noted the existence of tribes which are familiar only with dialogic speech and for which monologues are totally alien. More precisely, these are tribes whose only speech outside of dialogues consists of ready-made ritualistic monologues. In our usual cognitive speech as well, monologues, much more than dialogues, are subject to ritualization. The temporal and transient shape of both creative speech and meditations on verbal creativity lends itself much more easily to critical debate than to individual report.