

N. S. Trubetzkoy's Letters and Notes.

Prepared for publication by Roman Jakobson

with the assistance of H. Baran, O. Ronen, and Martha Taylor.

Janua Linguarum. Studia Memoriae Nicolai van Wijk Dedicata.

Edenda curat C. H. van Schooneveld. Indiana University, Series Maior, 47.

Paris: Mouton, 1975. 506 pp.*

If Trubetzkoy were the hero of an old drama and the book now lying before us the text of his role, we might have said that the playwright made wide use of dramatic irony. A great Russian scholar, he never lectured and relatively seldom wrote in Russian, and his epoch-making work was translated into his native language many years after his death; an emigrant and an Austrian professor, he watched with disgust the inability of Marr, this false prophet of Marxism in Soviet linguistics, to master dialectical materialism; an aristocrat, he despised the West and was hated by the Nazis for his anti-imperialist views. But this is not a play. The volume before us is a collection of Trubetzkoy's genuine letters, miraculously preserved through bombs and fires and published by their addressee with several additions,¹ including an index of names (there are about 700 of them from St. Methodius on) and an index of languages. This book is a story of a great life, and the nearer the date on the letters to the spring of 1938, the sadder it is to read them, for we know that soon we will reach the end.

Below, I will try to do two things: to piece together the places that permit us to reconstruct some features of Trubetzkoy's portrait (for all we know about him comes from a few of his autobiographical notes, Jakobson's obituary, his foreword to the present volume, and the materials supplemented to Cantineau's translation and the second German edition of *Grundzüge der Phonologie*) and to call attention to some of his ideas that have not become common property and were better developed in the letters than in his published works.

1. As is usual with the men of Trubetzkoy's caliber, he learned and grew all his life, but we do not see him climb the mountain from the bottom. His gestation period is hidden from view, and the observer only watches his conquests of one summit after another. The letters of 1920 and 1921 already display a mature philologist and thinker, head and shoulders above his contemporaries. His opinion of an average linguist was shockingly low. A courteous man, usually ready to withdraw too harsh a criticism or sacrifice a

* Linguistics 18 (January, 1980), pp. 543–556 (revised in 2017: slightly edited for style).

¹ Five letters to N. N. Durnovo (with Durnovo's notes on phonological correspondences), letters to V. G. Bogoraz, I. Shishmanov, A. Meillet, Mme. Meillet, J. J. Mikkola, J. Forchhammer, N. van Wijk, and E. Fischer-Jørgensen, an article on racism, a lecture on Lev Tolstoy, W. Porzeziński's proposal for the promotion of Trubetzkoy to a candidate of professorship, and a list of Trubetzkoy's courses and seminars at Vienna University.

statement likely to offend a colleague, a reserved professor constantly on his guard lest his or somebody else's remarks alienate a potential friend, in the letters he did not conceal his contempt both for many a "general of science" and numerous nonentities, let alone charlatans and impostors. He was often violently biased, and we see him on different occasions almost choking with repulsion and scorn. Appellatives like *blockhead*, *fool*, *idiot*, *bloated celebrity*, *a tenth magnitude star*, and characteristics like *foolish book*, *not without a bent for scholarship but stupid*, *utter imbecility*, *perfectly inane* come up in many pages of his letters. He used to reproach Jakobson for his disregard of the public: Jakobson's works, in his opinion, were too good for the manuals and journals that published them and overloaded with brilliant ideas; the material in them was not brought down to the level of an average reader (who is dull, lazy, and unsympathetic), etc., etc. Even his greatest predecessors could at times leave him entirely unmoved. "For inspiration I have reread de Saussure, and I must say that at the second reading he impressed me much less. On the whole, there is little there that is of value, and the main thing is the same old trash" (p. 241). But Trubetzkoy was prone to outbursts of sudden bad temper, and some of his judgments might be due to a passing fit of petulance rather than deep-rooted dislike.

Even though Trubetzkoy does not emerge from his correspondence too full of the milk of human kindness, his opinion of the rank and file in science, which denied most readers even an ordinary modicum of perspicacity, and his occasional rudeness (never meant to be published), were not those of a snob. Snobbery, like his aristocratic origin, had nothing to do with it. He just had no patience with mediocrity and not enough sense of humor to laugh off his irritation. Incidentally, he was far from self-confident, and the fear regularly haunted him that his own presentations were not good enough, that he would fail, that nothing but the politeness of the audience would save him, and so forth. Snobbery should be made of sterner stuff.

In the later period, he constantly complained that he was tired of repeating the same general truths year in, year out, that the same people went to all conferences and said the same things, and that the more seldom scholars met, the better. Very rarely, as after the International Congress of Linguists in Copenhagen, would he return home cheerful and contented.

Today it seems that Trubetzkoy was surrounded by a constellation of the most outstanding peers, but it only seems so because history tends to shrink distances and compress intervals, and we forget that many of those who understood and perhaps loved him were in those days either his pupils (gifted beginners but still only beginners) or popularized the new teachings rather than contributed to them, or lived in other towns and countries, or could not advance at his speed. Besides, what looks today like a unified front was rather the opposite; we are apt to ignore details and small divergencies, but forty five years ago those divergencies need not have seemed small. Like many others,

Trubetzkoy was more easily hurt by a venomous critic than comforted by a friend. However, he set high store by the Prague Circle and, while thinking back to its history, recollected with genuine affection “the heroic period of preparation for the First Linguistic Congress, the unforgettable days of the Phonological Conference, and many other beautiful days” he had spent with its members (p. 372, note 7).

Trubetzkoy, as mentioned above, was always careful to anticipate hostility and usually preferred to leave unpalatable truths unsaid. But this conformism, doubtlessly fed by the abnormal and precarious circumstances of an emigrant’s life, did not go very far. He might delete a paragraph in his article, but he never praised what he did not like; and, if people wanted to know his sincere opinion, he was most explicit. When attacked publicly, he invariably defended himself, even though he was not a fighter by nature and polemic was not his element. Likewise, he was absolutely honest with his students. He could spare their feelings, but no degree of personal attachment prevented him from saying what he thought.

The only person who really went hand in hand with him was Jakobson. Trubetzkoy admired Jakobson’s work (though sometimes disagreed with his conclusions), sought his advice, and trusted him more than anybody else (but even him not unconditionally: see the beginning of Letter 154 and note 1 to it, p. 356). He had a great respect for Durnovo, once called Bubrikh a genius, thought highly of Winteler, Sapir, Meillet, Polivanov, Yakovlev, Zipf (which does not mean that he always approved of all they wrote), admitted that Van Ginneken’s theories, fanciful as they might be, were stimulating and clever, and so forth, but Jakobson was more than a highly esteemed colleague, more than a friend whom he was always pleased to see and with whom he exchanged library books: he was a fellow-in-arms. Apparently, Trubetzkoy mostly valued people for their creative potential and did not care for friendships unless those meant scholarly cooperation.

It is surprising how non-informative his letters are as regards the outward circumstances of his life (the only exceptions are the first ones). A man endowed with talent for music and painting, he never mentioned a visit to a theatre or a museum (in Vienna!), never talked about the people he met, unless they were linguists. He was equally reserved about his political views, his Eurasian activities, academic life or specific questions of education. The details that break through are there only in connection with something else, never for their own sake. Quite by chance we learn that he was a regular church-goer (and the choir used to rehearse in his apartment), that he would not get up early on a Sunday even to discuss phonology with Jakobson, or that he greatly disliked anniversary speeches. He wrote about his health (which was never good) only to explain a long silence or a delay in some project or in answer to a direct question, and about his pecuniary situation (which was not too brilliant either) only because he often needed travel money and seldom knew where to obtain it. Even his

daughter's marriage was mentioned by pure chance: he was telling Jakobson that at the moment there was an extra room in the apartment in which he would be quite comfortable. I do not think that, since the letters were addressed to a close friend, there was no need to enlarge on extraneous matters: their meetings were relatively brief, devoted to professional questions, and comparatively rare.

Trubetzkoy must have had a deep aversion to all sorts of administrative work, and for many years Jakobson wrote business letters, made inquiries and convened meetings for them both. Naturally, Trubetzkoy did quite a bit himself, but every new project usually made him sit down and ask Jakobson *to order, to see to it, to rectify, to make haste*. He was worldly enough to realize that without organized efforts phonology would not gain popularity. Therefore, participation in every congress was planned like a military campaign: allies were recruited from different countries, and the Circle's forces were deployed in the best way possible (all deviations from what he considered optional tactics made him extremely unhappy).

It is clear that Trubetzkoy was a man of rare personal integrity but temperamentally not suited to feel too great an interest in the affairs of others. He was sympathetic up to a point but not very helpful when it came to procuring jobs or organizing somebody's defense. Only if touched to the quick could he do some ineffective scheming as in the affair with Pfitzner.² His was a constant fear of being imposed upon or snubbed, and his manner of address was formal; though he soon discarded 'Uvazhaemyi Roman Osipovich' for 'Dorogoi Roman Osipovich', he never forgot to sign: "Prince N. S. Trubetzkoy." However, he promoted his pupils and did not avoid the common lot of pushing them and writing recommendations. He was not vain, but signs of recognition meant a lot to him, and he knew his worth. Scholarship was the main thing in his life. It stayed with him in vigil and sleep, on suburban trains and at health resorts. He called his fierce dedication to research a sort of addiction. He was incredibly diligent. In the course of about fifteen years he produced a stream of articles and books, and the letters allow us to follow the process of their creation step by step, very often to read their first drafts, to recognize his weaknesses, and the better to appreciate his triumphs. Those letters, so poor in descriptions of towns, hotels, and theatres, are an all-important document for a future biographer of Trubetzkoy as a philosopher and scholar.

Trubetzkoy was able to look at himself and the cause he served with a surprising measure of objectivity. He wrote a remarkable letter in January of 1935. It is very long (more than seven printed pages), and its beginning has a direct bearing on our subject. This is the relevant passage, given like all excerpts in my translation:

² Pfitzner was a historian but above all a Nazi agent. There were rumours that he would be transferred from Prague to Vienna, and Trubetzkoy tried to prevent the transfer.

I will be unspeakably grieved and sorry if you allow “the surroundings” to engulf you, if you leave international linguistic problems for petty provincial battles and fritter away your time on polemic against “Weingart’s party” and such trifles. Journalism has some allurements, which, however, on closer inspection, turns out to be sheer trumpery. “Ties with pulsating reality” are actually replaced there by skimming over the surface of things, “many-sidedness” is replaced by the non-sidedness that is spiritual vacuity. Bohemia as a way of life, so typical of journalism, results in an intellectual Bohemia and kills scholarly thought. You have always been attracted by Bohemia. When one is young, it is harmless. But sooner or later there comes an age of “settling down.” You write that you have no new scholarly ideas, that you have dried up, that you need “to betray the theme.” And under this pretext you immerse yourself in the interests of *Slovo a Slovesnost*, journalism, meetings with the Czech literary Bohemia, internecine Czech fights, and all this kind of nonsense. And I think that just this stands in the way of your scholarly activities. I do not believe in your scholarly sterility. I think that *mutatis mutandis* you are undergoing the same process as I am: a transition from an overlong intellectual adolescence to intellectual maturity. Maturity is not the same as old age and does not mean sterility. Not only do mature people continue their creative work; they create the most valuable of all that they will leave to posterity. Only they create in a different way from the young. At first it is difficult to get used to the new method of work. It seems at first that there is nothing left at all, that everything is over. A break, even a short one, alarms and arouses anxiety. But this is due to the lack of habit. Actually, there is nothing to worry about: you will create but not as before. Subconsciously, you are worried that things will not be just as before. But let me assure you that this is not dangerous. What you lose in brilliance and ostentation you will gain in the constructions’ solidity. Remember how we have created up till now. The printing press could not catch up with us: each of our works came out outdated (at least for us). One construction replaced another. This is a typically young way to create. Now *this* has probably come to an end. But in return, things will stand solid, and there will be no need to rebuild so often. Instead of an ostentatious creative fountain there will be a slow but mighty and broad river. At first it brings pain: what is the matter? has youth passed and old age set in? But that’s just it: besides young and old age there is also maturity, besides a fountain and stagnant water there is a river flowing smoothly and evenly on. One has to adjust oneself to this thought and all will be well. But if one refuses to adjust and starts rioting, things may go badly. If under the pretext of the cessation of your scholarly activities you devote yourself to Czech journalism, you will soon really shed your talent, decay, and become morally degraded. All attempts to perpetuate one’s youth are senseless. Transition from youth to maturity is a law of nature, like the alternation of day and night or winter and summer. Each stage of human life has its pluses and minuses. Maturity is not worse than youth. But the most important thing is to be oneself (pp. 313–314).

As we know, Trubetzkoy was granted the good luck to die when the flow of his creative genius was at its mightiest.

To the long quotation above I would like to add one more from his next letter (February 21, 1935),

Perhaps linguistics must become an applied science. To me at least it is absolutely alien, and I believe there are different types of scholars. Not every good mathematician will be a good engineer, but an engineer cannot do without a mathematician. During the present “crisis” we have approached the moment when the government begins to close departments that have no palpable ties with the needs of everyday life. From this point of view one can now say that the mathematician somehow depends on the engineer, that is,

depends financially on him; he will not be paid if his science is of no use to the engineer. Therefore, there is every *practical* ground for the “pure” scientist to prove that he has ties with life. As a practitioner you are replaceable, but as a theoretician you are not. However, once you become involved in practical matters, questions of application, popularization, etc., you lose the knack for theoretical work (p. 323).

Despite his growing fame Trubetzkoy often felt rootless and solitary. His background easily accounts for his mastery of German and French and poor knowledge of English. But though he spoke German quite fluently, Vienna did not become his second home. As he said in one of his letters, since he could not live in Russia, it was all the same where he went, be it even America. At the end of his life, he became more and more interested in the development of phonology in the United States; besides, he thought of another emigration and once wrote to Jakobson that the time seemed to have come for learning English. He did not know how prophetic his remark was.

His views on history were grim throughout his life. He saw the world undermined by poverty, steeped in racism, and ruled by militant mediocrity. He predicted that the basest, the most elementary and primitive forms of culture, virile and aggressive because of their primitiveness, would ultimately efface the things he cherished, for such is the logic of history, and there is no way to withstand the onslaught of barbarism (see especially pp. 174–175). Like many outstanding scholars, he was to a marked extent a split personality: morose and pessimistic when he pondered people’s future and happy in the pursuit of his studies. At any rate, he never allowed his general outlook and even his nervous breakdowns to interfere with his passionate quest for truth.

2. Though *Grundzüge der Phonologie* is only one of Trubetzkoy’s posthumous books and though in his lifetime he published numerous articles on Indo-European, Slavic, and Caucasian linguistics (phonetics and morphology), Old Russian literature, poetics, and metrics, to say nothing of ethnography and Russian national life, his reputation as a general phonologist and his role in the development of structuralism largely overshadowed his other achievements. The letters show how versatile he was, how many things interested him between 1920 and 1938. The main lines of his work are summarized in Jakobson’s obituary and in the foreword to this book, so that there is no need to trace them again. Naturally, we do not find any new startling hypotheses in the correspondence, for Trubetzkoy was in the habit of publishing his discoveries soon after he made them, and “the printing press could not catch up with him.” But the statements in the letters add many touches to his published works, supply a new dimension here and there, and throw into relief details that could otherwise have been overlooked.

The first thing that attracts our attention is that Trubetzkoy was perhaps more interested in diachrony than in synchrony. Had he lived longer, *Grundzüge* would have become an introduction to a more monumental volume on sound change or even linguistic change as such. At the end of 1926, Jakobson pleaded

for a systematic view of historical phonetics. Jakobson's letter is lost, but it is clear from Trubetzkoy's answer that this approach was not new to him. A page and a half devoted to this problem gives a good idea of his meditations and insights:

I fully agree with your general considerations. In the history of language, many things seem fortuitous, but the historian has no right to take them as such: the general lines of the history of language, if examined attentively and consistently, never prove to be fortuitous; consequently, nonfortuitous must also be the details; one must only detect the logic. The inner logic in the evolution of language follows by definition from the fact that "language is a system." In my lectures, I always try to disclose the meaningfulness of evolution. This is possible not only in phonetics but also in morphology (and probably in lexis). There are some exceptionally telling examples, for instance, the evolution of numerals in the Slavic languages (the evolution depends entirely on whether the dual is preserved as a live category), the evolution of the Russian conjugation, and so forth. If de Saussure did not dare to draw a logical conclusion from his own thesis that "language is a system," it is mainly because this conclusion would have run counter not only to the commonly accepted idea of the history of language but also to the commonly accepted notions of history in general. For the only meaning allowed in history is notorious "progress," that is, a fictitious, self-contradictory notion, which reduces "meaning" to "meaninglessness." From the point of view of general historians the only permissible "laws" for the evolution of language are like this one: "the progress of civilization destroys the dual" (Meillet), that is, strictly speaking, laws that are, first of all, very dubious, and, secondly, not of a purely linguistic nature. But a careful study of languages with a view to the inner logic of their evolution demonstrates that this logic exists and that it is possible to formulate numerous purely linguistic laws, independent of the extralinguistic factors of "civilization," and so forth. To be sure, these laws will not consider "progress" or "regress," and that is why from the viewpoint of general historians (and all evolutionists in general: ethnologists, zoologists, etc.) they will lack the principal "make-up" of the laws of evolution. Just for this reason such an understanding of the evolution of languages meets with opposition. Other sides of culture and people's life also evolve with their specific inner logic and according to their peculiar laws, which also have nothing to do with "progress." And because of that ethnography (and anthropology) do not want to study such laws (pp. 96–97).

Those words were written in December 1926. A year before that (November 20, 1925) he wrote to Durnovo the following:

In your defense of Shakhmatov you say that in his linguistic theories he relied on history. And this is just what seems bad to me. Historians know very little about the most ancient period in the life of the Russian tribe and themselves ask us, linguists, for information. For instance, historians now constantly refer to Shakhmatov's theories saying, "as has now been proved by modern linguistics" or something like this. But the allegedly "proven" thing was proved not by the linguist Shakhmatov but by the historian Shakhmatov who of course could not have commanded the same respect of the professional historian as the linguist Shakhmatov. I believe that in order to avoid such misunderstandings, linguists must first set up their theories without any recourse to history: such a purely linguistic theory can later be interpreted historically and in this case it will be of much more use to historians than Shakhmatov's reconstructions, which are after all nothing but a linguistic interpretation of a preconceived idea going back to old historians (pp. 435–436).

But even when historical structuralism was in the cradle, Trubetzkoy realized that literature, though governed by the laws of its own, cannot be always studied as a self-contained, self-sufficient system. He wrote, “It is a fallacy to ‘explain’ literature by politics (or vice versa), but the connection should be stated: there must be a special science that will stand outside literature, politics, and so on and concern itself exclusively with the study of parallelism in the evolution of separate aspects of life. All this is applicable to language” (p. 98). Nor did the first teleological explanations of sound change carry him completely away: “The ‘goal-oriented’ (teleological) explanation of the causes of sound change can and will, of course, discover many new and important things. But I do not believe that this explanation should entirely supersede and abolish the ‘genetic’ explanation. In the life of language two factors operate concurrently: on the one hand, a subconscious striving for ‘ideal transformation’, and on the other, inexpedient shifts, introducing disorder into the system and born of ‘mechanistic causes’ ” (p. 104).

As is well known, Trubetzkoy worked for years on his *Outline of a Prehistory of the Slavic Languages* and thought about the general problems of reconstruction in both phonology and morphology. His ideas on this subject can be found in his articles and in *Kirchenslavische Grammatik*, and only a few remarks in the letters struck me as new. Compare the following passage:

I believe it is necessary to start with paradigms displaying the most rudimentary oppositions. In Russian, such are numerals. As regards gender, the numeral *oba/obe* gives the most rudimentary opposition ‘feminine : nonfeminine’, occurring in all cases (the numeral *dva/dve* shows the same only in the nominative and accusative). As regards cases, the most rudimentary oppositions are displayed by *sorok* and *sto*: here the general direct case (*sorok, sto*) is opposed to the general oblique case (*soroka, sta*). These rudimentary oppositions may give rise to new oppositions in other declinable words: the “nonfeminine gender” becomes masculine and neuter, the “general direct case” the nominative and accusative, the “general oblique case” a set of four cases. But not all those secondary oppositions coexist in one and the same paradigm.... Don’t you think that for an opposition to exist in the speaker’s consciousness it must be expressed in concrete forms in a rudimentary shape? Or, to be more precise, that only then are we entitled to speak of the existence of this opposition? (p. 267).

Trubetzkoy’s literary studies ran along the same lines as in linguistics. He used to repeat that the history of Russian literature had not yet been written, for the monuments had been studied only for the cultural information they contain or in order to compare them with contemporary West European literature. He advocated literary investigations in which old texts would be examined first and foremost as works of art and judged by the aesthetic criteria of their epochs (see, for instance, p. 86). His *Vorlesungen über die altrussische Literatur* are all in the making on the pages of his letters, and only one excerpt will suffice here. I could not find its idea in such a condensed form anywhere in his lectures or articles, though their general tenor is of course familiar:

Pushkin, folklore, futurists — all these are different entities just because of their different aesthetic approaches, because of their views (unconscious and conscious) on the goals of poetry. To say that in all these kinds of poetry we find identical devices is not enough. The devices are after all not identical, for they are used by people with totally different aesthetic “systems of poetical thought.” Besides form and content, every work of poetry also contains an aesthetic approach, which alone makes the work poetical. Even if it is possible to study form independently of content and content independently of form, neither can be studied independently of the aesthetic approach’ (p. 17).

After that he compared at some length Khlebnikov and Pushkin. Unfortunately, he never defined the concept of the aesthetic approach in greater detail.

It is important to realize the unity of Trubetzkoy’s endeavor: he was not a phonologist or a Slavist who sometimes for the sheer pleasure of it or under the pressure of the university curriculum lectured and wrote on poetry, Old Russian literature, Afonasiy Nikitin’s diary, or Indo-European morphology. He was above all a thinker, a structuralist, seeking regularity and system where the material presented to the eye nothing but chaos. He had a genius for classifying details and reducing an infinite variety of them to a finite number of relevant types. Naturally, the phonic level of language lent itself to structural interpretation better than morphology or syntax, and it is no wonder that as late as 1934 he could confess to “a sacred fear of everything related to syntax” (p. 297). He also enjoyed subjugating linguistic matter to numeric laws: his works on metrics (of which there are many fragments in the letters), his interest in statistics and Zipf’s research give ample evidence of this side of his activities.

What saved Trubetzkoy from the formalistic excesses of many of his disciples was his wide range of knowledge. He knew too much and was too cultured to admire uniformity. He did indeed envisage the idea of structural morphology with the same types of oppositions as in phonology (p. 190) but did not carry this plan into execution. Suffice it to read his commentary on the system of the Russian verb (for instance, on pp. 222–225) to see that he was not a slave of his own nomenclature. He examined the facts, and they yielded their structural base to him. Skeletons are always more alike than the flesh fastened to them, so that he could not help noticing some important similarities. But he never BEGAN by trying to discover privative or gradual oppositions, correlations, and the like. Though he suspected that they were there, each case needed corroboration anew. And he was quick to perceive that structuralism and the algebraic encoding of language are different things (p. 401).

As could be expected, many pages of Trubetzkoy’s correspondence are devoted to phonology as a new branch of linguistic science. Very numerous are the letters dealing with prosody. In his book *O cheshskom stikhe*, Jakobson formulated his law of the incompatibility of free stress and distinctive quantity and later often returned to it, proving it from different points of view, discussing stress as a special category, and investigating “musical stress” in various languages. Since that time prosodic questions constantly came up in the correspondence of the two scholars. It is characteristic of Trubetzkoy’s

epistolary style that he preferred to react to directly stated questions rather than start long disquisitions. He usually had to be provoked and drawn out, and Jakobson did it with inexorable regularity. “I have read your letter with very great interest and sincerely thank you for it. Here is my answer to what must be especially interesting to you and is also of the greatest importance to me,” — these words from a letter dated March 7, 1921 could serve as an epigraph to the entire volume. Thus, prosodic discussion at first turned around Jakobson’s law and metrics. Trubetzkoy’s readiness to follow Jakobson was motivated by his own predilections: one of his first articles written abroad was on stress in Common Slavic, and one of his most stimulating studies of quantity appeared in 1936. Readers of *Grundzüge*, unless they are specialists in this branch of phonetics, seldom examine the section on prosody, so that it is only fair to repeat that “suprasegmentals” were always at the centre of Trubetzkoy’s interests and included metrics with many ramifications: Greek, Latin, Russian, Czech, and Serbian, among others.

The phonological point of view is manifest even in the earliest letters. It is present in Jakobson’s book *O cheshskom stikhe* and in Trubetzkoy’s review of it (*Slavia*, II, 1923/24, pp. 452–460), but from the casual way Trubetzkoy uses the words *phonological* and *nonphonological* about Slavic length, half-length, etc. in January 1923 (p. 44), it is clear how much those things were taken for granted by both men at that period.

At the end of 1928, Trubetzkoy wrote to Jakobson of his discovery of universal symmetries in the structure of vocalic systems (p. 117–118), and the search for symmetry in phonology inspired him during the remaining ten years of his life. A skewed system was not allowed to exist (see, for instance, p. 128). Trubetzkoy did not seem to be troubled by the question of why all systems were (or had to be) symmetrical, and from a historical, “teleological” perspective strove for ideal transformations, that is, symmetry. Thus, even he did not avoid a measure of schematization, the inevitable price one pays for a wish to introduce order in place of chaos, and this is one of the main reasons structuralism as an approach to data is in a sense a self-destructing force: chaos cannot be conquered completely, for every system is stable and developing at the same time, and when synchronic structuralism wins its decisive victory, it is at its weakest: it has already sown the seed of reaction. For some more years the second and third generations of followers will apply the new principle with consistency and rigor, taming newer and newer layers of material, only to find themselves in a desert spotted with cages.

Then somebody will come and say that structuralism means dehumanization, that life is lush and colorful, while structuralism is grey and dead, and it will take decades to understand that a great idea has been made into “a trap for fools” and rescue the initial conception. Or a bold innovator may cast a cursory glance at the epistemological foundations of structuralism and find them wanting, for it is impossible to PROVE anything about basic approaches,

and Trubetzkoy, for instance, never tried to prove that phonological systems HAVE to be symmetrical: he only discovered that they could usually be represented as such (and he knew more than a hundred of them); the rest was a matter of induction.³ But let it be repeated: Trubetzkoy was too versatile and cultured to depend wholly on one principle, and he was always open to new turns of thought. Here is a most interesting commentary on a table of percentage relations between consonants and vowels in the Slavic languages:

According to this table, from the percentage relation between syllabic and non-syllabic phonemes it is possible to deduce the types of phonological correlates. It seems that if in Slovak, for example, there were fewer consonants, musical stress would have sprung up in it and if Russian acquired one or two more consonants, it would have lost its free stress, etc. But it is worthy of note that all this is only applicable to the Slavic languages. In French, the relation between syllabic and nonsyllabic phonemes is approximately the same as in Slovak..., but phonological correlates are quite different. You have now agreed that the law of incompatibility of musical stress with timbre distinctions in consonants is operative only in the Slavic languages. Some other similar “laws with an ethnically limited range of action” can be stated for the East Caucasian languages.... So I believe that alongside the really universal structural phonological laws laws limited by the morphological (and perhaps also lexical) type of language exist. Since language is a system, there must be a close link between the grammatical and the phonological structure of language. Given some type of grammatical structure, the number of phonological systems is limited. This puts constraints on both evolution and the application of comparative phonology (February 25, 1930, p. 153).

This deep and fruitful idea hardly gave rise to any investigations, and, when several experiments along such lines were carried out in the sixties, they owed nothing to Trubetzkoy’s insight. But it is instructive to observe how uninhibited Trubetzkoy was in his generalizations.

Of the ideas never developed later one can also mention Trubetzkoy’s strong belief that different phonemes never have identical realizations. This seems a peripheral question, but it is important, for whole schools in phonology are characterized by their attitude toward so-called overlapping. It is curious that (at least in 1932) Trubetzkoy rejected the idea of overlapping point-blank and did not for a moment doubt that Jakobson would be of the same opinion (pp. 260, 262–263). As a matter of fact, he should have welcomed this idea, for, if phonemes are defined by their place in the system, they certainly may have identical realizations (of course, in different contexts). This thesis has been discussed many times later (for instance for Danish and Russian and in purely theoretical works), and there is little to add to this discussion. Trubetzkoy’s weakness seems to lie not so much in the fact that he fought the statement he should have supported as in that he agreed to talk about the “same” and

³ Compare a characteristic passage from a letter to Doroszewski (October 27, 1931): “The defining of concepts is not my forte. I always try to be understood. I know from experience that this aim can be attained not by definitions but by a practical application of concepts” (p. 227).

“different” realizations. It will shock some almost like blasphemy, but Trubetzkoy, as far as I can judge, deserves today only one reproach: he sometimes failed to live up to his own phonological principles. His detractors liked to accuse him of creating a lifeless abstraction, of driving a wedge between phonology and phonetics. Yet he never succeeded in keeping the two apart, and his phonology was adulterated by phonetics to the detriment of both.

Phonology, as conceived by Trubetzkoy, must start with functions and gradually work its way down to realizations, so that realizations will be characterized in terms of functions, not vice versa. Though Trubetzkoy knew it very well, he was unable to shake off the weight of tradition. In connection with “overlapping” Trubetzkoy should have said the following. “‘Sounds’ are not linguistic units, they form no system and are interesting only in so far as they are manifestations of distinctive entities (phonemes). They cannot be compared by linguists, and to a linguist they are neither identical nor different. The entire problem is a remnant of an antiquated view of the phonic substance of language.” This answer would have been strictly in character, but Trubetzkoy did not give it, and to this day we do not know whether a phonology starting with functions and free of phonetic empiricism is a possibility or a utopia. The well-known attempts to obtain realizations without using these same realizations as building-blocks have proved largely unsuccessful.

There is such a wealth of interesting ideas in Trubetzkoy’s letters that no overview can do justice to all of them. The dialog between Trubetzkoy and Jakobson, which lasted for eighteen years, will in equal measure be a source of inspiration to those who have always revered Trubetzkoy as their teacher and, one can hope, to those who have shrugged off his theoretical legacy as belonging to the age gone by. Historians of science will be able to study his comments on numerous contemporary articles and books (and he was an excellent critic), his attitudes toward different trends, his opinion about many events in linguistics. Among other things, they will read for the first time *A project of a phonological questionnaire for Europe* (pp. 380–383) and two bibliographies (*Japanese contributions to phonology in 1935–1937*, pp. 415–416, and *A note for the Phonological Bulletin*, pp. 417–422), which are published as supplements. The book is precious in its entirety. A work of love, it is not merely an echo of a past epoch but a window into a world of great thoughts and brilliant discoveries.