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Luigi Weber

## The Futurist Novel before and After the First World War

**Barbara Meazzi: “Il fantasma del romanzo”: *Le Futurisme italien et l’écriture romanesque (1909–1920)*. Chambéry: Presses Universitaires Savoie Mont Blanc, 2021. Collection Arts, Cultures, Pouvoirs. ISBN 978-2-37741-059-0. 430 pp., 76 figs.; 21 cm x 15 cm, 30.00 €.**

Ten chapters, a prologue and an epilogue, twenty years covered, about ten authors examined, and an impressive number of titles (just under one hundred and ten) listed in the appendix: this, somewhat futuristically condensed to bare numbers, could be a first synopsis of Barbara Meazzi’s substantial monograph dedicated to the great absentee in most critical panoramas of Futurism, the novel. Or, to be more precise: a scholarly investigation into a subject that is undervalued and has little presence in university courses and is consequently largely ignored in standard histories of Futurism. It is concerned with ‘the phantom of the novel’, as the title says, a phantom which Alberto Savinio would have liked. He often spoke of the *revenant*, a returning spook, i. e., something that has been ousted from life but does not cease to inhabit it and to disturb it. If we try to understand how life relates to the genre of the novel, on the basis of current literary theory, we have a perfect introduction in Meazzi’s book.

Her study of the numerous prose works published between 1909 and 1929 by Marinetti and his associates reminds us that the term ‘novel’ was constantly denigrated by the Futurists. They wanted to see it crossed out, disavowed, eliminated from their theorizing. Although Futurism was prodigal as far as theory was concerned (more than 1,000 manifestos that outlined the movement’s objectives in every field of art and life), it took until 1939 before a manifesto dedicated to the novel was published.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, reflections on the genre were in no short supply, but could only be found in letters, prefaces and occasional statements by various authors. And yet, their repudiation was contradicted by the large number of prose works they published, sometimes with an experimental bent but sometimes also rather traditional.

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<sup>1</sup> “Il romanzo sintetico: Manifesto futurista”, written jointly by Marinetti, Luigi Scivo and Piero Bellanova. The launch of the manifesto was followed by an “Inquiry into the Futurist Condensed Novel” promoted by Scivo’s literary agency A.L.A.

An internal partition divides Meazzi's book into two parts. In a historical progression, constructed step by step, she suggests that 1919 was a turning point within the twenty-year period examined here. The first phase – to which five chapters are dedicated – is seen as a collective endeavour in which Futurism – represented here by Marinetti, Aldo Palazzeschi, Paolo Buzzi and the Ginanni Corradini brothers – attempted to implement their idea of an 'anti-Romantic novel', culminating in Arnaldo Ginna's collection of thirteen short stories, *Le locomotive con le calze* (The Trains that Wore Stockings, 1919), still influenced by Art Nouveau and Symbolist aesthetics. In these early years, an occultist and esoteric trend (brought about, no doubt, by the two brothers from Ravenna who called themselves Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra, and by Buzzi) lived on, as well as a predilection for what Meazzi calls the *incongruo*, an absurdity that is not only comic but full of logical and linguistic disruptions, predating Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, and resembling Karl Valentin's sketches. After that, the leader of the Futurist movement decided to take the helm back into his own hands.

Thus, the next five chapters are mainly dedicated to Marinetti, and to his awkward position in the 1920s within an international literary panorama that had changed considerably in contrast to the previous decade. Meazzi addresses Marinetti's standing in the postwar cultural industry (or 'the field', as Bourdieu would say<sup>2</sup>), as well as with the rôle played here by Umberto Notari. The rise of a literature of an erotic and sometimes soft-pornographic nature was one of the commercially most successful traits of the period. This trend had a strong appeal to the bourgeois public, but was also subversive with respect to the unwritten rules of public morality. Marinetti also dedicated during his fertile three-year period from 1918 to 1920 some of his prose writing to war and post-war themes, with various ups and downs as far as his experimentalism was concerned. Finally, in chapter X, Meazzi examines the pioneering episode of collective writing carried out, between 1928 and 1929, by the group I Dieci ('The Ten').<sup>3</sup>

One of the greatest merits of Meazzi's book, written in French by an Italian scholar working in the transalpine Université Côte d'Azur in Nice, is her tribute to the bilingual nature of Marinetti's literary works, i.e. the intimately and at the same time dialectically interwoven use of the French and Italian languages. Meazzi not only takes into consideration the author's choice of the two languages, but also how their different national scenarios balanced and spread out dif-

<sup>2</sup> See Bourdieu: *Les Règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*.

<sup>3</sup> I Dieci was a collective of novelists formed on Marinetti's initiative in 1928 and including both Futurist and avant garde writers. One of their experiment in collective writing was the novel *Lo zar non è morto* (The Tsar Did not Die, 1929).

ferently over time. Meazzi's examination of Marinetti's linguistic strategies results in a repeated underlining of the differences, often very significant, between the dates of the works' drafting, publication, translation and reprinting. This analytical approach also applies to the, admittedly minor but important cases, of the works of Paolo Buzzi and Bruno Corra. And it is precisely in chapter II, entirely devoted to Buzzi, that her method becomes evident. Meazzi's systematic perusal of the manuscripts preserved amongst the Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Papers in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University and of the correspondences between various Futurist writers leads her to suggest hypotheses for which no clear philological evidence can be established. Her book attempts to shed light on a situation that is often ambiguous and rather confused. Even for some of the most important works in the history of Futurist literature the dates of composition are not known. For example, Meazzi convincingly proposes that *Gli indomabili* (The Untameables, 1922) was written, at least in its first draft, in French, in the same period as *Mafarka le futuriste: Roman africain* (Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel, 1910). In her view, the substantially traditional narrative structure links this work to Marinetti's pre-Futurist and Late-Symbolist legacy.

Another *fil rouge* in Meazzi's reading of Marinetti's prose works is her investigation into how he sought to renounce his "Symbolist Masters, the Last of All Lovers of the Moonlight",<sup>4</sup> yet at the same time extended their influence well into the early phase of Futurist experimentation with new literary devices and strategies.<sup>5</sup> Another recurring theme is the eroticism, imaginary rather than real, in the works of the 1920s, a period generally characterized by a 'return to order'. In short, we find the advocate of a *guerra – sola igiene del mondo* (War, the Sole Cleanser of the World<sup>6</sup>) more often than not eulogizing the proverbially opposite phenomenon, that of lust and erotic passion. Meazzi makes this explicit in chapter VIII, dedicated to the notebooks (*Taccuini*), still to be published in their entirety and in a faithful edition.<sup>7</sup> Meazzi operates here with the illuminating concept of *scrittura dell'immaginario* and its twin notion of *erotismo immaginativo*.

4 See the manifesto *Noi rinneghiamo i nostri maestri simbolisti, ultimi amanti della luna*, 1911.

5 See, for example, the use of Free Verse, inherited from Gustave Kahn and the Symbolists, in most poems included in the anthology, *I poeti futuristi* (The Futurist Poets, 1912).

6 The phrase is first used in the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), and then as the title of the manifesto *Per la guerra, sola igiene del mondo* (1911) and the anthology of manifestos, *Guerra sola igiene del mondo* (1915).

7 See Marinetti: *Taccuini, 1915–1921* and the recent critical study by Bragato: *Futurismo in nota: Studio sui taccuini di Marinetti*. The unsatisfactory situation regarding the diaries has also been discussed in Colucci: "New Research into Marinetti's Notebooks."

She refrains from any naive referencing of the diary notes to occurrences on and off the battle field, but rather treats them as an *Arbeitsjournal* that records reveries and hallucinations, triggered by a visionary, erotically obsessed author (perhaps in order to compensate for the atrocious realities of war), and then transformed into works of (erotic) literature.<sup>8</sup>

The centrality of Eros can also be found in Meazzi's careful and original reading of *L'isola dei baci: Romanzo erotico-sociale* (The Island of Kisses: A Social-Erotic Novel, 1918), written in collaboration with Bruno Corra, the first stage of a path of shared authorship that also includes *Un ventre di donna: Romanzo chirurgico* (A Women's Womb: A Surgical Novel, 1919) with Enif Robert as co-author, and that results in the ten-hander *Lo zar non è morto* (The Tsar Did not Die, 1929). In chapter IX, we encounter a true prototype of the Über-novel, or hyperromance, *Gli amori futuristi: Programmi di vita con varianti a scelta* (Futurist Loves: Programmes for Living with Selected Variations, 1922). This collection of novellas with multiple endings – in a certain sense an 'open work' *ante litteram*, almost Oulipian in character – even came out with four different covers. Meazzi characterizes it with the witty statement 'For Marinetti, the path of the Futurist revolution, contrary to the models that Mussolini was about to propose, also included that of a sexual liberation'.<sup>9</sup> The space and attention devoted to these texts (*Taccuini, Isola dei baci, 8 anime in una bomba, Gli amori futuristi*) are well above the average quality of studies dedicated to the subject and constitute an undeniable strength of this monograph.

In Meazzi's book, Marinetti's playful use of pastiche and para-literature is very present in her discussion of *Mafarka* as a novel that courts, recycles, parodies and plunders Emilio Salgari, Edgar Allan Poe, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Gustave Flaubert, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells; her comments on *8 anime in una bomba: Romanzo esplosivo* (8 Souls within One Bomb: An Explosive Novel, 1919), which she relates to Blaise Cendrars' *J'ai tué* (I Have Killed, 1918; see p. 305), and *L'alcova d'acciaio* (The Alcove Made of Steel, 1921), which is rightly read, amongst other things, as a vitalistic, optimistic and virile reversal of Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade* (Under Fire: The Story of a Squad, 1916) (see pp. 327–328).

Meazzi's "*Il fantasma del romanzo*" is a very rich volume with a clear and comprehensible architecture, not obscured by the great diversity of themes

<sup>8</sup> Bragato in *Futurismo in nota* offers a detailed investigation into the causal chains between daily occurrences, diary notes and creative writing in Marinetti's *Taccuini*.

<sup>9</sup> "Pour Marinetti, le chemin de la révolution futuriste, contrairement aux modèles que propo sera bientôt Mussolini, passe aussi par la libération sexuelle." Meazzi: "*Il fantasma del romanzo*": *Le Futurisme italian et l'écriture romanesque*, p. 342.

and topics dealt with. The book is accompanied by a respectable iconographic layout – the illustrations are numbered up to fifty, but in fact there are seventy-six altogether – that also allows us to compare the editorial strategies in the different prints and reprints over the years. Meazzi offers a useful complement to the by-now rather dated precedent, *Marinetti editore* (Marinetti as Publisher), issued by Claudia Salaris in 1990. “*Il fantasma del romanzo*” contains three souls that are usually mutually exclusive: a popular one, which is represented here by the meticulous presentation of the plots of the novels or novellas examined; a critical-hermeneutical one, which moves beyond existing scholarship and contributes many new insights; and finally a philological one, capable of posing vital questions and often solving them with persuasive hypotheses, e. g. concerning the dates of composition or translation of the texts investigated here.

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