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Back to Futurism: the Ill-Digested Legacies

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Progress in any aspect is a movement through changes in terminology.

Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking.

Wallace Stevens, "Adagia"¹

You have objections? — Enough! Enough! We know them. . . We've understood!. . . Our fine deceitful intelligence tells us that we are the revival and extension of our ancestors — Perhaps!. . . If only it were so! — But who cares? We don't want to understand! . . . Woe to anyone who says those infamous words to us again!

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Manifesto del Futurismo"²

The recognition of the legacy left by Futurism to the Neo-avant-garde is a problem of reluctance and missed readings on both sides. Indeed, if we simply rely on statements voiced by the two movements fifty years apart, it would seem that there was no continuity between them. First, the Futurists, obviously, could not have spoken directly with the Neo-avant-garde, and second the founding manifesto placed emphasis on the natural obsolescence of their literary advancements, leaving no room for the recovery of their ideas:

The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade for finishing our work. When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts — we want it to happen! They will come against us; our successors will come from far away, from every quarter, dancing to the winged cadence of their first songs, flexing the hooked claws of predators, sniffing doglike at the academy doors the strong odor of our

decaying minds, which will have already been promised to the literary catacombs.³

Regarding Marinetti's diktat, which like any self declaration of poetics must be approached with caution, one should pay particular attention to the binomial catacomb-library that will be transformed in the years immediately after World War II from the ultimate Futurist mocking of the Academy into a bad omen for the avant-garde movement and its texts, condemned by the index of the academic "Sacred Rota."

Beginning in the late 1950s, the experimentation labeled "Neo-avant-garde" would borrow numerous stylistic instruments from the Futurists, although it rejected strongly any link with the Italian historical avant-garde — making at most limited concessions in the medium of so-called visual writing. The causes for such a stance likely reside in the censorship to which Futurism had been subjected following the end of World War II, mainly due to the enthusiasm it showed toward attitudes and ideologies dear to the Fascists. To restrict ourselves to this notion, however, would be a blatant case of myopia, as well as a wasted opportunity, for it would only identify the "embarrassing" reasons that compelled the new experimentalists to avoid Marinetti and his movement, and not the reasons that count at a deeper and more significant level.

We must not forget that the superimposition of Fascism on Futurism was often the excuse with which Academia rejected a movement that had attacked and questioned its authority. This academic ban created an inevitable corollary: a "publishing blackout," even worse than the scholarly censorship reserved to the Futurists, which lasted through the late Sixties and early Seventies. Between 1945 and 1963, in fact, the only edition of Marinetti's work dates to 1960 from a publishing house whose visibility was minimal (I am referring to the three volumes of Marinetti's plays by the Roman publisher Vito Bianco).⁴

On this issue, it is worth recalling, I believe, an interview of the Italian poet Arrigo Lora Totino, published in *Il Manifesto* in July of 2009. Totino, who likes to label himself a modern-day Futurist poet, stated that when talking about the Futurist "blackout" the emphasis should be placed on Academia rather than on the links between Futurism and Fascism:

D. *Do you believe that Futurism in Italy is still underrated?*

R. Of course. Always. Because of its ties to Fascism. It's a taboo. Even if Futurism had been founded ten years earlier.

D. *Whose fault is it?*

R. The so-called culture of the left has always looked at it and judged it badly for this very reason. Often presumptively. Without even knowing it. Grade: not classifiable.

D. *But today this is all water under the bridge. . .*

R. I don't know. In any case, then and now, the problem is a different one. . . .

D. *What do you mean?*

R. I mean that if some of the exponents of the Futurism had not been involved with Fascism, Futurism would still remain insufferable for the Italian academic culture. The problem, in Italy, is and always will be Academia, not the right or the left, Fascism or not. . .⁵

Now that we have perused some of the consequences of this "blackout" against the Futurist movement, perhaps we can better understand the reasons behind the opposition of the Neo-avant-garde, or rather, the non-reasons. There are two possibilities: on one hand, the Neo-avant-gardists, most of whom recognized themselves as part of the cultural left (as mentioned by Arrigo Lora Totino) ignored almost entirely the unobtainable Futurist texts and presumptively discarded any claims that a legacy between them and the Futurists ever existed. On the other, given the resurgence of stylistic elements dear to Futurism in the writings of the Neo-avant-garde, it would not be completely preposterous to think that they were fully aware of drawing from the Futurist writings, despite the fact that they insisted they were not cognizant of this, and preferred to hide behind the larger picture offered by the widespread avant-garde movements of the first half of the twentieth-century. Arrigo Lora Totino, however, was already fully active during the years of the *Gruppo 63* meetings, and therefore must be viewed as a reliable source.⁶ If he knew about Futurism, why not the *Gruppo 63* members?

The confusion one necessarily feels when presented with the Neo-avant-garde's objections to the hypothesis of a fruitful exchange between the two most important Italian experimental movements is enhanced by the fact that the new experimenters openly praised other historical avant-garde movements, as I have suggested. For them, in other words,

into a purer religion of art? Unless he wants to become a rapidly fossilizing monument of puerility, cheap reaction and sensationalism, he had better do so.⁹

In due time Pound, in his works chronologically coinciding with his fascination with Mussolini's Fascism, will absolve also Marinetti:

Any smart schoolboy can make fun of some detail or other in Marinetti's campaign, but the same clever sneer-sprouter would find it much more difficult to match the mass record of Marinetti's life, even if you limit it to his campaigning for public education in aesthetics and omit the political gestures, which any good writer might envy. You must judge the whole man by the mass of the man's results.¹⁰

The Neo-avant-garde, on the other hand, does not seem able to transcend the taxonomic framework of the Futurist "program," even when it relies on Angelo Guglielmi, one of its most prominent critics:

A fairly current way to conceive the literary "avant-garde," which also reflects the ways and terms in which it is historically framed, means to understand it as a movement whose main objective was to oppose an expressive situation so worn and abused that, with the resistance of its dead weight, would render each new choice of style and language difficult. Of course, the "avant-garde" is not simply this polemical and breaking-off moment with respect to a past no longer vital.¹¹

For Guglielmi, as a matter of fact, Futurism stopped right at the breaking point: the avant-garde, in the historical experiences available to him until then, had always been exclusively identified with antagonism; no one seemed to be willing to go a step further and see in it new aesthetic opportunities. For this reason, the critics of the Neo-avant-garde made an irreconcilable distinction between Futurism and the Neo-avant-garde, labeling the Futurists as "avant-gardists," and the writers of the Neo-avant-garde as "experimentalists," since "experimentalism" implies both the break from tradition and the institution of new literary paths, with the latter always overshadowing the former.

But this is a desperately superficial interpretation of Futurism: in fact, not a single example is offered to support what is at stake, and further commentaries by Guglielmi do nothing to avoid the suspicions that a large part of Futurist texts were unknown to the Neo-avant-garde:

Marinetti's avant-garde was born from controversial pre-texts, outside a clear ideological basis and serious expressive intentions. The Futurist's linguistic revolutions are loud and superficial. They work on the external frame of the traditional language in order to bring it to an irreversible point of crisis, to denounce its substantial content-emotional unproductivity. The inner or ideological core of the language remains intact; or rather it escapes their violence. After all, if we think about it, never the sense of language was and is so lacking as in avant-garde writers. [. . .] The revolt of the avant-garde writers generally has a content-emotional beginning. The formal interests occupy, despite appearances, a secondary place.¹²

The only recognition Marinetti and the historical avant-garde received is praise for their attitude towards Academia, an important precedent meant to break the existing literary system based on obsolete values. Unfortunately, focusing exclusively on the manifestos and dwelling on the setbacks rather than on proposed solutions, and highlighting only the ephemeral, the sensational, even the sophomoric aspects of Futurism, causes one to lose sight of what matters most. As Luigi Ballerini suggests in his introduction to *Gli indomabili*:

As it happens in most of Marinetti's texts, in throwing out the bathwater of their stylistic sloppiness, one runs the risk of throwing out the child as well, that is the structural intolerance of traditional literature, that dwell therein and that always perpetuates our thirst for original formal solution.¹³

This thirst does not seem to be shared even by Luciano De Maria, one of the first exegeses of the historical Italian avant-garde, who dismisses novels such as *Gli indomabili* or *Mafarka il futurista* as nothing more than the ultimate consequence of Romanticism, a critical remark that

simply follows the outdated analysis made by Massimo Bontempelli in his *L'Avventura novecentista*:

We profess great admiration for Futurism, which completely and unapologetically destroyed the bridge between nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Without its principles and its fearlessness, the spirit of the old century, which prolonged its agony until the outbreak of the war, would still today encumber us. [. . .] Moreover, Futurism accomplished this renovation with a temperature so high that the combination of all its attempts to attain realization constituted in itself a remarkable work of art: the last and most striking expression of Romanticism, which, in Futurism, burns and gloriously ends its long life.¹⁴

The uneasiness toward traditional literary structures is perhaps the greatest legacy left by Futurism, not only to the Neo-avant-garde, which will make it one of its greatest tools, but also to all the experimental writers who, from Alberto Savinio to Antonio Delfini and from Carlo Emilio Gadda to Tommaso Landolfi, represent the ideal counter-canon of Italian literature. Of course, the Futurists were not the first to feel this discomfort, and even when dwelling on a 'young' genre, such as the novel, one should at least go back to the writings of Carlo Pisani Dossi. However, the Futurists were the first to make this uneasiness toward tradition a focal point of their writings and action.

Practically all the tools Futurism forged to deal with the *vexata quaestio* of literary genres were ransacked by the Neo-avant-garde. This happened in two ways: consciously, I believe, when the parallels between the two groups are traced back to the manifestos (an easy target for Academia's allegations and therefore always available), and, perhaps unconsciously, when the parallels are with "minor" texts not readily available in the topical years of the Neo-avant-garde. Nevertheless, just a quick glance at Futurist texts would suffice to cause the Neo-avant-garde "claimed" dissimilarities with Futurism to crumble, thus allowing the similarities between them to emerge. It will not come as a surprise to see that it is even possible to comprehend the relationship between the two through the poetic declarations made by some of the exponents themselves of the Neo-avant-garde.

We must not, in fact, forget that beyond the apparent inflexibility of the *manifestos*, there are as many “Futurisms” as there are artists who boast of this affiliation, each with his own cultural background and interests, each with his own solutions to alleviate the uneasiness toward codified structures. It would not be outrageous to state that Futurism is a movement made up of artists with a common “research horizon.” Edoardo Sanguineti will use the same term fifty years later to define those writers who wrote under the auspices of the Neo-avant-garde. Moreover, Marinetti’s iconoclasm concerning what is known as *passéiste* literature is made explicit in his works only in limited circumstances, whereas in other instances there could be no greater distance between Futurist theory and artistic practice. After providing the “product” advertised in the manifestos, Marinetti’s writings seem in large part to fall back into traditional syntactic and formal structures while retaining few characteristics that are purely experimental.

However, it would be erroneous to limit Futurism and Marinetti to the ideological and programmatic statements of the early manifestos. In his introduction to *Gli indomabili*, Ballerini referred to Marinetti’s novel as an “abnormal inflorescence” of the Futurist plant. I want to emphasize that we are not talking about a “solitary genista”¹⁵ and that indeed the events “ex-grege” rather represent a constant among the historical Italian avant-garde for the number of works of this kind far exceeds the texts anchored to the declarations of the manifestos, and it is in this larger group of works that one can find the most genuine ingredients of the Futurist phenomenon:

In the pages of *The Untameables* [. . .] the law of consistency — which, in the forms of coercion, often degrades the inventiveness of the writers who cling to it — seems to have strayed miraculously. Ceasing to function as a strait-jacket, the fear that that law implies, ceases to be scary, and becomes an impetus, a dialectic seduction and sometimes an indispensable vice.¹⁶

Nonetheless, even the manifestos, especially those aimed at the establishment of a new literature, become an enlightening tool to verify the relationship between the two avant-gardes once the propagandistic excesses have been trimmed.

Four of Marinetti's contributions will serve as important starting points for our investigation (all of which will later form the basis for the Futurist literary revolution): the "Manifesto Tecnico della letteratura futurista" (May 11, 1912), "Distruzione della sintassi - Immaginazione senza fili - Parole in libertà" (May 11, 1913), "Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica" (March 15 - April 1, 1914) and "Il romanzo sintetico" (December 25, 1939).¹⁷ The direct result of the first three manifestos are the tables of words-in-freedom by Marinetti and other Futurists, as well as Marinetti's novel *Zang Tumb Tumb*, a true "cloning" obtained by the "informative cells" of the manifestos. In it the most destabilizing rules for traditional syntax take shape: "*We must destroy syntax by jotting down nouns at random, the way they come to life with the use of the verb in the infinitive, the abolition of adjectives, adverbs and punctuation and the resulting explosion of the new graphic organization of the words-in-freedom.*"

Rather than in the linear works of the Neo-avant-garde, the methods of the syntactic Futurist revolution will find fertile ground in their so-called visual writings, to which I will devote more time later. In the meantime, however, it will be more advantageous to expand upon the objectives Futurists hoped to achieve through their paratactic innovations. If one of the certainties about the Neo-avant-garde experimentation is, in fact, the reduction, the "lowering" of the poetic self, it is frankly impossible not to think of Marinetti's manifesto of 1914, in which we read: "We systematically destroy the literary self." To achieve this goal, the important tools were the use of the naked noun (alone or *sintesimoti*) and the verb in the infinitive. Now, with the exception of very few works, such as Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb*, it is clear that not even the Futurists fully comply with the directives of their manifestos, but the seed planted by them often flourishes in the Neo-avant-garde writings. The use of the infinitive, for example, is present throughout the oneiric-shamanic writings of Edoardo Sanguineti's *Laborintus*.¹⁸

yet by now

the seascapes and the sea king all the sensitive seascapes
 all the landscapes recover in me and the ripe skeleton
 of the sea king and the cerebral skeleton of the sea king's daughter
 et in cerebro meo recover in me and push back to the days
 and in comprehension and comprehension and comprehension
 yet by now. (16, vv. 34-40)

Clearly Sanguineti was not interested in all the modulations Marinetti proposed for the use of the infinitive, yet in both writers we find the reduction of the self and the attainment of new rhythmic cadences that are inborn in this stylistic element. It is not inappropriate to note also that if Futurists and other Neo-experimentalists move deftly and successfully in order to escape the trap of the self, this operation is always a chimera for Sanguineti who, even in his first work, albeit without the excesses of the works to come, still finds himself caught within it.

The extremes we see in some of the Neo-avant-garde poetic writings, where verbs have been almost totally eliminated and reduced to participles functioning as attributes, can be seen as a plant born from Futuristic stock. Let us examine Adriano Spatola's "Landscape:"

The solid unbreathable night the ballast
 the air above the houses the decomposed energy
 tense survived thrown in the middle of the grass
 strewn dispersed destroyed while returning
 toward the selection the twisted root
 the cord the tackle the discordant clouds
 beyond exhumation the vanished frame
 tricked-out elaborated soaked by the rain
 the perverse unnamable grimace the crude
 lacerated hill reduced to silliness.¹⁹

Indeed, if we deprive the verb tenses of one of their basic syntactic functions, the temporal / modal function, which fossilizes them into one form, the natural evolutionary step would be precisely that of their gradual disappearance.

Regarding nouns in the Futurist sense, particularly the *sintesimoti* nouns or trains of nouns (those joined by a hyphen) one cannot speak, however, of a slavish use or their complete absence in Neo-avant-garde texts: see, for example, the construction of the word "waterlight" in the concluding stanza of Alfredo Giuliani's "Nel mio cieco parlare" ("My city burns like a bush, / All of my mouths are thirsty. And I pray / Waterlight for the voice tender sprouts, / For the mute tenebrous dust shaved by days; / Wear and Love. While silence burns me.")²⁰ In the case of the above-mentioned Spatola, one of the few Neo-avant-gardists who could knowledgeably speak of Futurism (his thesis on Surrealism forced him to study the Italian historical avant-garde), we witness an analogically

humorous short circuit. “Hybrid” words based on Marinetti’s *Zang Tumb Tumb* are turned into ironic-sarcastic graft leads: *bay-cavity, tools-pliers, parking lot-necropolis, trailers-garden, rubble-mounds*, culminating with the preposterous replacement of the Futurist’s *man-submarine* with his *ass-periscope*. In both cases, however, the end result takes us back to Marinetti’s manifesto where the use of this stylistic element was intended to create “an elastic and comprehensive analogy.”

In this context, we should not underestimate the Neo-avant-garde’s fascination with nominal accumulation, which leads in some cases to a result very similar to that of *sintesimoti* nouns, albeit deprived of the dash. I’m thinking mainly of Elio Pagliarani’s “life iron city pedagogy” in “La ragazza Carla,” where the lack of punctuation makes up for the lack of a unifying hyphen; or of Antonio Porta’s poem “Di fronte alla luna,” where the presence of the comma does not imply separation but is rather an attempt to find a specific rhythmic scansion, evident in the first two words of the first verse where the punctuation is clearly ectopic:

Useful, warning: the mattress
Society, foam rubber, blotting
paper. Angry kicks and ink
spots: [. . .] (4, vv. 1-4)

In other cases, the accumulation of nouns also results in the sensation of a magmatic language at its boiling point:

and aroused bottles launching ramps forearms
coelenterates hanging by their feet sucking the drop
(Spatola, *The Philippine Trench*, 7, 1-2)

now he stamps on the gravel, now he shakes his own
shadow; a dream;
swallows, urinates, having awaited from the start the taste
of camomile, the hare’s temperature, the sound of hail
the shape of the roof, the color of straw:
(Sanguineti, *Erotopaegnia*, 4, vv. 2-5)

What good are the picklocks the wrench the rust,
the crackle of locusts in summer’s cauldron?
(Giuliani, “Prologo,” vv. 33-34)

But will we be
 Protected from long from the bite
 Of the blue horsefly, from injections
 Of calcium bromide, from the czarina's nails?
 (Nanni Balestrini, "Apologue of the Fugitive," vv. 9-12)

These are indeed none other than the Futurists' stylistic feature of trains of nouns (*sintesimoti*) pushed to an extreme.

Whoever is patient enough to go through the myriad of Futurist manifestos will be able to enjoy a little gem, the "Manifesto del romanzo sintetico" (1939), which will remove all doubts, if any remain, on the legacy bestowed by the historic Italian avant-garde to the Neo-avant-garde. Although the date of publication seems to place it too far away from Marinetti's stylistically interesting narrative works (*Mafarka il futurista* (1909), *Come si seducono le donne* (1917), *L'isola dei baci* (1918) and *Gli indomabili* (1922)) along with other Futurist novels (beginning with Bruno Corra's *Sam Dunn è morto*,²¹ Aldo Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* (1911) and Arnaldo Ginna's *Le locomotive con le calze* (1919)), in it we find the true essence of the futuristic conception of the novel.²² In hindsight, it is, in fact, a manifesto unlike any other, clearly based on works previously published, as we can infer from Corra's preface to the second edition of *Sam Dunn è morto*, issued twenty-two years before the publishing the manifesto itself, in which he claims authorship of the first synthetic novel.

The first edition of this book sold very quickly. The success among the public was probably higher than what I expected. Even the critics spoke well of it: however, they did not understand the real importance of this novel. I have had many enthusiastic articles. I have not had that one that I really wanted. The one that noticed that:

1) My Sam Dunn has died has a decisive significance in literature from a technical standpoint;

2) it is the first synthetic novel, that is the first novel without preparatory chapters, without filler passages, without idle details, without common places diluted and relaxing . . . etc..

*3) those who follow the very modern evolution of the arts know today how important, in any field, a concrete statement is on the path that will lead to ways of increasingly more synthetic expression, which is less and less caring of everything that is not essential.*²³

In the manifesto, after fiercely attacking the literature anchored in the past and the public that, despite everything, continues to feast on it, (“We know that the general public does not make subtle distinctions between books to read they eat again and again cold verses rolled into pills and nauseating prose soup where the rice diluted in the white hair of tradition and of critics causes vomiting”) the personifications of Poetry and Novel (Synthetic, of course), enamored of one another, consummate their new love. In an idyllic scene set in a mountain forest clearing, we meet *Poetry* “slender, swathed in multicolored words-in-freedom” with “her waist tightened by specific desire” who “is ready to love” but is forced to wait amid sighs and other manifestations of boredom. Close to her moves “with difficulty,” on a bed of dead leaves, “the paunchy *Big novel* tattooed with minutiae that lived under big lips always drooling gossip.”²⁴ Soon after the forest begins to tremble at the arrival of a “very young nimble smiling ready to attack **synthetic novel**.” “To seduce and force a kiss is his rhythm and Poetry accepts it greedily from rapture to rapture until fainting for an intoxicating total fusion.”²⁵ It is in this fusion, in the creature that will be born from it, that one can easily anticipate the links between Futurism and the Neo-avant-garde. Indeed, if we turn our attention to the Neo-avant-garde novel, we will find that it is immersed in total disregard for pre-established literary genres, which is indeed the gospel the Futurists preached over and over again. Equally important is that a large number of Neo-avant-garde novels would be written not by storytellers but by poets who put into practice in both form and content, the same convictions that sustain their work in verse — another echo of the synthetic Futurist novel.

There exist many other instances that strengthen the thread connecting Futurists and new experimenters and they too deserve at least a quick mention. It is important that we keep in mind the following techniques: the attempt at re-founding the poetic language through the demolition of the entire old linguistic-referential baggage in order to synchronize with the new era; the critique of the writer’s function and the analysis of the relationship writer-reader;²⁶ and, finally, the transparent attention to the para-textual aspect and to certain qualities of language (visual and sonorous).²⁷ Despite the big gap in the “intentions” of the two movements, all these techniques found in Futurism if not the first then at least the most widespread and conscious use. Here, having to choose between so many enticing experimental dishes, we must inevitably limit ourselves to one in particular: visual poetry.

Before proceeding I wish to emphasize that focusing on the visual provides a formal model for the Neo-avant-garde non-visual writings as well, highlighting their *grammatological* surface. As we will soon discover, in fact, some tables of words-in-freedom imply a rethinking of both the concept of text and that of a literary language that anticipates certain theses of Jacques Derrida, present in his *De la Grammatologie*:

The end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book, even if, even today, it is within the form of a book that new writings — literary or theoretical — allow themselves to be, for better or for worse, encased. It is less a question of confining new writings to the envelope of a book than of finally reading what wrote itself between the lines in the volumes. That is why, beginning to write without the line, one begins also to reread past writing according to a different organization of space. If today the problem of reading occupies the forefront of science, it is because of this suspense between two ages of writing. Because we are beginning to write, to write differently, we must reread differently. For over a century, this uneasiness has been evident in philosophy, in science, in literature. All the revolutions in these fields can be interpreted as shocks that are gradually destroying the linear model. Which is to say the *epic* model. What is thought today cannot be written according to the line and the book, except by imitating the operation implicit in teaching modern mathematics with an abacus.²⁸

The philosopher's observations tend to demolish the blind belief that a text can have a unique and unchangeable meaning, and posits a multiplication in the number of legitimate interpretations. In other words, Derrida's deconstructionism shows many (and legitimate) layers of textual interpretation.

It is also necessary to refer back to Luigi Ballerini who, in one of the few serious studies on visual writing in Italy, establishes a clear path between Futurism and the Neo-avant-garde.²⁹ In addition, analyzing the tables of words-in-freedom, Ballerini isolates two lines (each implying very different interpretative strategies). But let us proceed in order.

Les mots en liberté futuristes of 1919, in which Marinetti included the "Manifesto tecnico," the "Distruzione della sintassi e l'immaginazione

senza fili” and “Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica,” represents the apogee of Marinetti’s belief in an exegesis of both the words-in-freedom and the tables of words-in-freedom.³⁰ Among the numerous tables found in this work, Ballerini isolates the three that best exemplify the great leap forward in terms of the Futurists’ treatment of language: *Après la Marne Joffre visita le front en auto, Le soir, couchée dans son lit, elle relisait la lettre de son artilleur au front* and *Une assemblée tumultueuse (sensibilité numérique)*.



Despite the strong asyntactism of Marinetti’s earlier tables (like *Battaglia a 9 piani* and *Marcia Futurista*), the use of different typefaces and the intent to manipulate the normal horizontal arrangement of the style of writing implied “a notion, preoccupied to orchestrate tones and times of reading within a verbal ‘quid’ still intended as content.”³¹ In the three above-mentioned tables, however, one can observe how the idea of a privileged verbal language has been abandoned in order to open up to “a linguistic investiture of not-verbal signs, and therefore to the recognition of their grammatological potential.”³²



These tables serve as clear examples of the fusion between typographical writing, signs of various derivation and “stains caught in their metabolic ecstasy,” in which, to paraphrase Ballerini once more, the signs, verbal or otherwise, are treated as objects which do not claim the right “to say” but as pre/texts that require “a cognitive-emotional task whose final output implies the analogical participation of the audience.”³³

Such an interpretation also applies to the Neo-avant-garde, where the active participation of the reader was not only desired, but deemed necessary, and in which it is also possible to identify the reasons behind the accusations of illegibility made by the establishment:

The breaking-off or dispersion of representativeness and the barrier or the deceleration of the identification mechanisms [...] could have not gone smoothly for in it we can identify the mechanisms of the hidden transmission of ideological and behavioral values. So the new texts will be accused of terrorism against innocent readers, and indeed of total illegibility.³⁴

Returning to the two types of tables of words-in-freedom, we can safely say that both will be taken up by the Neo-avant-garde: directly from the Futurist experimentation when the visual writing continues to place a certain emphasis on lexicon and its argumentative possibilities (textual tables); and, through the prodding of the European avant-garde, when the signs, typographical or not, are treated as objects (object-typographic tables).

The discrepancies between the two types of experimentations in the tables by Ugo Carrega and Emilio Villa, here reproduced, are evident and offer a clear example of the different paths the two distinct Futurist typologies had opened to the Neo-avant-garde. In Carrega, the faithful



Ugo Carrega



Emilio Villa

verbal dimension of the text remains intact and there are no attempts at a linguistic synthesis of extra lexical materials, while Villa, though he begins with excerpts of grammar and syntax, arrives at the total dismemberment (and in other cases at a true disintegration) of the shapes of the alphabet. At any rate, among the many Neo-avant-gardists who endeavored in the visual field, very few refer directly to Futurism.³⁵ In addition to Carrega mentioned above, Carlo Belloli, Rodolfo Vitone, Vincenzo Accame and a few others, trace the origins of their work to Marinetti and Corrado Govoni's tables of words-in-freedom. Marinetti and Futurism are more easily recognized as precursors of research in the visual field by the non-Italian Neo-avant-garde, such as the Brazilian group *Noigandres*, the French artists Pierre and Ilse Garnier, the Czechoslovakian Jiri Kolar, the American Jonathan Williams and the Hungarian Thomas Kabdebo.³⁶

In his *Verso la poesia totale* (certainly one of the most important studies on experimental poetry — visual, sound, concrete, etc. —), even Adriano Spatola rarely contextualizes Marinetti and Futurism and, furthermore, never passes judgment of the Italian historical avant-garde movement.³⁷ However, Futurism is not totally obnubilated; through the words of the visual artist Clemente Padín cited by Spatola in his book, Futurism is thrown in the cauldron of experiences that places emphasis on the visual:

[A] voyage into the fusion of language and space, one that begins with Simia of Rhodes (300 BC) and his “hatchet” and moves through Rabelais’ “bottle,” Carroll’s “mouse tail,” Valffger’s typographical ornamentation (1670), Marinetti’s words-in-freedom, Apollinaire’s calligrammes, Schwitters’ sonatas, Werkman’s typography (1941), etc., all the way to Lettrism.³⁸

To further confirm the osmotic exchange between the two experimental movements, one must look at Heinz Gappmayr, a concrete theorist and poet of the new avant-garde,³⁹ who in emphasizing the characteristics of visual writing seems to paraphrase Marinetti’s literary technique: “Visual poetry’s form and content derive from elements such as the letter’s color and disposition, the page’s length, and even the paper’s quality.” Marinetti had, in fact, stressed the importance of

color and the arrangement of the letters in “Distruzione della sintassi – Immaginazione senza fili – Parole in libertà:

On the same page, therefore, we will use three or four colors of ink, or even twenty different typefaces if necessary. For example: italics for a series of similar or swift sensations, boldface for the violent onomatopoeias, and so on. With this typographical revolution and this letter’s multicolored variety I mean to redouble the expressive force of words.⁴⁰

This is one theory that he put into practice (albeit partially, due to the high costs that the use of color would have required) in *Otto anime in una bomba*.⁴¹

As for materials, both within the Neo-avant-garde and the Futuristic realms, one should look beyond Gappmayr’s suggestions and consider a wider scope of possibilities than merely paper. For Futurism I have in mind the violent campaign against the book clearly spelled out in “Manifesto della cinematografia futurista:”

The book, a wholly passéist means of preserving and communicating thought, has for a long time been fated to disappear like cathedrals, towers, crenellated walls, museums, and the pacifist ideal. The book, static companion of the sedentary, the nostalgic, the neutralist, cannot entertain or exalt the new Futurist generations intoxicated with revolutionary and bellicose dynamism.

This will lead to Fortunato Depero’s bindings of books with screws and bolts or to *Anguria lirica (Lyric Watermelon)* printed directly on tin sheets by Tullio d’Albissola: the first signs of the shift from the concept of book as a “place of writing to object” that will again be massively campaigned by the burgeoning Neo-avant-garde.⁴² Here, the examples would be endless, however it would suffice to look at magazines such as *Geiger* or *Tau / ma*, whose outer typographical format and/or methods of production already exemplify the shift. The Neo-avant-garde takes us one step further as its concept of the text expands to encompass the reality in which we live. The high point of this moment is the exhibition “Parole sui muri,” organized in 1967 and then repeated the following year, in Fiumalbo, when an entire village was transformed into a canvas or a

page.⁴³ This event is tangential to the argument at hand, but whoever wishes to elaborate on this subject will find a brilliant and comprehensive critical account of the days of Fiumalbo in Eugenio Gazzola's *Parole sui muri: l'estate delle avanguardie a Fiumalbo*.⁴⁴

The last aspect I wish to emphasize is the experimentation in sound that often characterizes both Futurism and the Neo-avant-garde. I am not referring to the Futurist manifestos dedicated to music nor to the experimentations of John Cage, Luciano Berio and Luigi Nono, but to the strong sound connotations of numerous texts developed by the two avant-gardes: *pieces* that have no reason to exist, if not within the space and the time in which they are performed: the textual score is only of use to the author who developed it — one of the reasons why the *happening* became a vital part of Neo-avant-garde experimentation.⁴⁵ But let us not forget that the “Futurist evenings” and the “Dada soirée” can be regarded as the pioneering “previews” — for they were the first to place such a strong emphasis on the poetic performance.

The continuity between the two movements as highlighted in the often unbridgeable gap between written text and read text must be noted in this area as well. For example, such a similarity can be drawn between Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb* and a sound poem by Spatola. The impossibility of a reading or at least of a cognitive reading of Marinetti's novel, given the violent asynctatism of an imagination devoid of grammatical connectors, was noticed by the Russian Futurists, who emphasized the broad distance between the typographical product and the author's personal reading aided by his facial expressions and his oratory:

Have you ever realized the explanation that can be given to the difference between your “words-in-freedom” and your “declamations?” I, as soon as I heard you recite, I thought: is it really worth condemning [...] the traditional syntax, in order to enable it again, reinserting the predicate that has been removed, by means of gesture, facial expression, intonation, and onomatopoeia?⁴⁶

The objection of the Russian futurists, who saw in Marinetti's *performance* a narrative restoration, was certainly not far from the truth.

With the Neo-avant-garde, the distance between the written word and the spoken word appears in all its glaring evidence. “Aviation /

Aviator,” later changed to “Aviation / Aviateur,” is one of Spatola’s best known sound pieces; one the poet repeatedly performed at various poetry *happenings*.

A.	B.	C.	D.	E.	F.
vi	iol	ol	lat	ne	re
ol	viol	tol	tal	ne	re
tol	tot	tiot	tiot	lot	re
z	oz	lo	ol	tat	ol
az	iol	viol	lat	re	er
a	a	---	ar	tor	tor
rot	lot	tot	tat	ol	tiol
---	ol	laz	lat	or	or
ro	---	lio	lior	lazier	---
tro	trion	riol	tiol	er	or
ar	to	tu	ti	tra	ter
en	er	e	ol	toll	tel
tal	tar	zar	sar	ser	ur
ar	tor	---	er	an	ur
sur	sor	sol	loss	res	tess
tut	ot	at	---	tiss	is
sil	arl	orl	os	sot	is
sill	silk	klis	os	os	silt
laz	lai	lay	loi	laz	y
ax	tax	lay	toi	lor	lorn
lis	vis	vi	---	vial	vial
viol	vial	ol	ois	loss	lose
lost	lot	tol	too	oo	oos
---	t	tak	kat	el	eel

Those who had the good fortune to witness a representation of the text in question know that Spatola’s execution is a play on the two words of the title pronounced in such a way to reproduce the sound of a plane that hovers in the air and then dives.⁴⁷ The performance ends with an explosion of machine gun fire in which the poet mows down his imaginary victims.

What then is the relationship between Spatola’s declamation and the alleged score that was suggested by Spatola himself in an issue of

the journal *Malebolge* (the first part of which I have reproduced here)?⁴⁸ It would be useless to look for a correlation between the written word and the recitative word, as well as trying to decipher Spatola's new phoneticization. In a process not too different from that of his visual work, the crushing of individual words into phonemes incapable of articulating any meaning urges us to visit auroral zones of language open to numerous interpretations, one of which is privileged by the author in his *performances*. Finally I should point out that in Spatola's score among the few words that hold meaning and are in perfect sequence between one another (if traditionally we read from left to right), the *loss-lose-lost* triad remains significant. If such a procedure was intentional and, furthermore, were to function as another sign of the lost identity between the written and the stated word, it could only be verified through a painstaking analysis of the text in question. But even if it were merely an amputation of other words arranged by chance on the page, one would immediately be catapulted back to Stéphane Mallarmé and his famous insight that *un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* or Savinio who constantly preaches the thirst for independence of the words themselves:

We — we and our vocabulary, this heavy code of words [. . .] We play with words, we use them, but we do not even think that words must be considered, must be *respected* for other reasons: for their own personal reason: that words can be different from what they are *for us*. And to the words we are middle-class husbands, demanding, blind [. . .]. And the words, thirsty for freedom, thirsty for independence, thirsty for personality, show us from time to time, with the complicity of typewriters [. . .] their other “face” their ‘real’ face: the face of their free souls.⁴⁹

Clearly the focus on a new exploration of language that characterized Futurism and the Neo-avant-garde can function as a common denominator for writers who operated outside of the two movements. A sheer number of these authors prove that linguistic experimentation is a *sine qua non* for a counter-canon which runs the risk of being much more legitimate than the canon recognized by the Italian literary Academy. Between Futurists “disobedient” to the diktats of their own manifestos and certain Neo-avant-gardists (for whom even the very broad Sanguineti's “research horizon” feels restrictive) there is

no solution of continuity. Authors such as Savinio, Delfini, Landolfi or Gadda, can be strung up with the likes of Spatola, Pagliarani, and Villa and inserted into a sound literary category as a fitting part of this new profile. It would be a blunder to give up looking for the numerous points of contact between Futurism and the Neo-avant-garde, because doing so, would undermine not only a comprehensive understanding of the movement closer to us, but it would also prevent us from having a clear picture of our literature, in which Futurism and Neo-avant-garde are not two isolated phenomena of experimentation, but two distinctive moments of a trend that has caused, and continues to cause, short circuits in what Academia offers as the “official canon.”

Notes

1. Wallace Stevens, “Adagia,” in *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 184–85.

2. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Fondazione e Manifesto del futurismo,” *Poesia* 5, no. 1-2 (February–March 1909): 16. Originally published in French in the *Figaro* on February 20, 1909. All subsequent English translations (unless indicated) are my own.

3. Ibid.

4. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Teatro*, ed. Giovanni Calendoli (Roma: Vito Bianco, 1960).

5. Giuseppe Caliceti, “L’ultimo dei futuristi — Intervista a Arrigo Lora Totino,” *Il Manifesto*, July 14, 2009.

6. Born in Turin in 1928, Arrigo Lora Totino is known internationally for his experimental sound and visual poetry. He was one of the founders of the literary magazine *Antipiùgiù* (1959–1966) and the magazine *Modulo* (1966). In those years, with the composer Enore Zaffiri and the painter Sandro de Alexandris, he established the “Studio di informazione estetica” in Turin (1964) for the research on the relationship between visual and sound poetry, electronic music, and plastic art. In 1978 he published an anthology of seven LPs, *Futura, Poesia Sonora* (Milano: Cramps Records), with a historical-critical introduction to avant-garde sound poetry. Since 1974 he has been performing *Poesia ginnica e liquida* and a series of mimic declamations of avant-garde texts, spanning from Futurism to Dada, from the Russian Zaum to Expressionism, from Surrealism to Lettrism and Concretism. In 1978, he created the show *Futura* with the mime-actress Valeria Magli and director Claudio Vitalone, broadcasting on the

program *Nero su bianco* of RAI 2. In 1980, he hosted thirteen episodes of the program *Colpo di Glottide* on sound poetry (RAI 2). In 1988 he published *Verbale 1987 — Fluenti Traslati, concertazione drammatica in quattro tempi* (Napoli: Morra Editore). In 1989, he edited *Storia della poesia sonora* in four cassettes (Reggio Emilia: Elytra) and in the year 2000 he published *Luce ed Ombra* with Getulio Alviani (Roma: Bulino). Since 2000 he has been publishing mainly art books.

7. Published in Milan on June 23, 1913 in French and Italian as a leaflet for the Direzione del Movimento Fascista press.

8. In *Blast* 1 (1914): 33.

9. *Ibid.*, 144.

10. Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (London: Stanley Nott, 1936), 107.

11. Angelo Guglielmi, "Avanguardia e sperimentalismo," in *Gruppo 63. Critica e teoria*, ed. Renato Barilli and Angelo Guglielmi (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976), 328.

12. *Ibid.*, 330-31.

13. Introduction by Luigi Ballerini entitled "La legge dell'ingratitudine: letteratura e industria tra le due guerre," in *Gli indomabili*, by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, ed. Luigi Ballerini (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), xviii-xix.

14. Massimo Bontempelli, *L'avventura novecentista* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1938), 236.

15. In reference to Leopardi's poem "The Genista or The Flower of the Desert."

16. Ballerini, "La legge," viii.

17. For all quotes from Futurist manifestos and Marinetti's writings, I refer to the fourth edition of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. Luciano De Maria (Milano: Mondadori, 1998). For these manifestos: "Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista," 46-54; "Distruzione della sintassi - Immaginazione senza fili - Parole in libertà," 65-79; "Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica," 98-107 and "Il romanzo sintetico," 222-26.

18. If not indicated otherwise, all the poems mentioned henceforth by Edoardo Sanguineti, Alfredo Giuliani, and Antonio Porta can be found in *I Novissimi* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1995). The poems of Adriano Spatola can be found in *The Position of Things* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2008).

19. Adriano Spatola, *Diversi accorgimenti* (Torino: Geiger, 1975): 49.

20. Alfredo Giuliani, *Il cuore zoppo* (Magenta: Varese, 1955): 28.

21. Bruno Corra, *Sam Dunn è morto* (Milano: Edizioni di "Poesia," 1915).

22. Ginna's title immediately recalls Mayakovsky's *La nuvola in calzoni* (1915) and in this respect it would be interesting to see how much the Italian Futurists actually knew about Russian Futurism and what the latter contributed to Italian Futurism. This should not be surprising if we think of both Marinetti's frequent trips to Russia and Bontempelli's *novacentismo* carrying on the struggle for an international literature. For the text in question, see Vladimir Mayakovsky, *How are verses made? with A Cloud in trousers* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1990).

23. Bruno Corra, *Sam Dunn è morto* (Milano: Studio Editoriale Lombardo, 1917), 9-12.

24. Marinetti, "Il romanzo sintetico," 223.

25. "In a bed of evergreen laurel, Poetry half-naked slender languishes wrapped in colored lines of words-in-freedom with brilliant black pupils of sweet amorous fury and her waist tightened by specific desire would like to love she waits she gets bored she sighs. A few centimeters away on his ottoman of dead leaves moves with difficulties the paunchy Big Novel tattooed with minutiae that lived under big lips always drooling gossip. Putting on perfume scented with enameled flowers and Parisian accents has forgotten the flavored meaty bud of the beautiful one nearby. The woods all green shiver breath a warm voluptuousness of resin then immediately scream because he must give room to the lacerating step of the very young nimble smiling ready to attack **synthetic novel**. To seduce and force a kiss is his rhythm and Poetry accepts it greedily from rapture to rapture until fainting for an intoxicating total fusion." Ibid.

26. See Elio Pagliarani, "Per una definizione dell'avanguardia," in *Gruppo '63. Critica e teoria*, 338-43. In this text, a transcript of Pagliarani's speech read at the Comes (European Community of Writers) Convention in 1965 devoted to the avant-gardes, the author identified precisely the characteristics of all the avant-garde movements: "In my opinion avant-garde movements are characterized: 1) by a conscious critique of the present *expressive means*, 2) by the critique, at all levels, of the function of the operator and the operator-customer relationship (where terms such as artist and audience are just synonyms; and it is clear that changing the terms means to have already changed at least the angle, the point of view of the phenomenon of observation); 3) by the critique of the finality of the work and/or the function of art" (339).

27. For some works in the visual field, I will use the term object-typographical, neologism coined by Mario Diacono in "L'oggettippografia di Marinetti," *Caleidoscopio* 9 (1971).

28. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967). This quote comes from an American edition: *Of Grammatology*, trans.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1969), 86–87.

29. Luigi Ballerini, “Ottico ideottico: scrittura visuale in Italia 1912–1972,” in *La piramide capovolta* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1975).

30. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Les mots en liberté futuriste* (Milano: Edizioni futuriste di “Poesia,” 1919).

31. Ballerini, “Ottico ideottico,” 72.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 70–72.

34. Francesco Muzzioli, *Teoria e critica della letteratura nelle avanguardie italiane degli anni sessanta* (Roma: IEI, 1982), 14. For a more precise idea of the discussion between legibility and illegibility, we must go back to the two main interpreters, Alberto Moravia — see “Illegibilità e potere,” *Nuovi argomenti* 7–8 (1967): 3–12 — and Giorgio Manganelli — “Letteratura come mafia,” *Quindici* 9 (1968). For an accurate account of the prolonged tit-for-tat between Moravia and Manganelli, not limited to the two articles in question, see Grazia Menechella, “Moravia/Manganelli e la querelle tra leggibilità e illeggibilità,” in *Homage to Moravia*, ed. Rocco Capozzi and Marco Mignone (New York: Forum Italicum, 1993), 125–39.

35. Let us keep in mind Lamberto Pignotti, Eugenio Miccini, Magdalo Mussio, Claudio Parmiggiani, Mario Diacono, Gastone Novelli, Martino Uberto, Arrigo Lora-Totino, Giancarlo Pavanello, Paolo Castaldi, Franco Vaccari, Stelio Maria Martini and so on.

36. For a clear picture of the “Neo-Futurist” groups, see Sandro Briosi, *Marinetti* (Firenze: Il castoro, 1969), 84.

37. He was responsible, in collaboration with his brother Maurizio, for the founding of the magazine *Geiger*, published in nine issues and a major magnet for international visual experimentation: a “magazine-object” assembled by hand in no more than six hundred copies with the originals sent to the editor by artists from around the world. The choice of the title was justified on the grounds that the magazine “would have indicated, ticking, the experimentation of poets, painters, musicians, sculptors, architects, graphic designers, etc.” For this quotation and a short history of the birth and the early days of *Geiger*, see Maurizio Spatola, “Mio fratello poeta,” in *Adriano Spatola poeta totale*, ed. Pier Luigi Ferro (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1992), 22–24.

38. Adriano Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale* (Paravia, Torino, 1978), 28.

39. Noteworthy are two short essays on concrete poetry and visual writing. See Heinz Gappmayr, “La poesia del concreto,” *Modulo* 1 (1966), and

“Sinossi delle caratteristiche della poesia tradizionale e visuale,” *Bollettino Tool* 1 (1968).

40. Marinetti, “Distruzione della sintassi,” 77.

41. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Otto anime in una bomba* (Milano: Edizioni futuriste di “Poesia,” 1919). Having rejected the idea of polychrome variations at the last minute, because of the excessive cost that would have resulted, Marinetti devoted a chapter to each soul (the eight souls in which the poet sees his psyche divided) printed in a different font. In the ninth and final chapter we see the union of the eight souls that once mixed generate an explosive compound, destined to detonate on the Austrian enemy.

42. Ballerini, “Ottico ideottico,” 70-72.

43. See Claudio Parmiggiani and Adriano Spatola, eds., *Parole sui muri* (Torino: Geiger, 1968).

44. Eugenio Gazzola, *Parole sui muri; l'estate delle avanguardie a Fiumalbo* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2003).

45. The interest in sound must have involved music as well. The encounter text-music is evident in *Zang Tumb Tumb*, where some ideas from “Distruzione della sintassi - Immaginazione senza fili - Parole in libertà” are put to the test: “With the aim of giving the greatest number of vibrations and a deeper synthesis of life, we abolish all stylistic bonds, all the bright buckles with which the traditional poets link images together in their prosody. Instead we employ the very brief or anonymous mathematical and musical symbols and we put between parentheses indications such as (fast) (faster) (slower) (two-beat time) to control the speed of the style.” Identical is the Neo-avant-garde’s path: in both their sound and visual poems we can observe a massive use of musical terms and in some cases the poem is written directly on a score sheet (idea already explored by the Futurists as well).

46. Benedikt Livsic, *L'arciere dall'occhio e mezzo* (Bari: Laterza, 1968), 155.

47. For those who have not yet had this opportunity, there still exists, despite Spatola’s premature death, the possibility to remedy the problem. In a monograph dedicated to Spatola by the video-magazine *Videor*, there is a registration of Spatola’s performance in Piazza Duomo. See “Adriano Spatola,” *Videor* 3 (1989).

48. Adriano Spatola, “Aviazione/Aviatore,” *Malebolge* 1 (Spring/Summer 1967): 8-12.

49. Alberto Savinio, *Vita di Enrico Ibsen* (Milano: Adelphi, 1979), 15-16.