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# (No) Queer Futurism: Prostitutes, Pink Poets, and Politics in Italy from 1913-1918

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## A QUEER FUTURISM?

This study intended to examine Futurist representations of historical prostitution within their urban environments of Paris, Milan, and Florence. It quickly became evident, however, that Futurists were by and large unconcerned with the material concerns of the prostitutes themselves, but very interested in what prostitutes could signify in an artistic and social context, building on the contributions of artists such as Baudelaire and Manet. These Parisians were among those who thrust the prostitute into the central discourse of literature and art in the nineteenth-century and in doing so signaled an important shift towards modernity. Half a century later, in Florence, while Dino Campana sings to the chimerical *musica fanciulla esangue* in his *Canti uffici*, Italo Tavolato, a homosexual journalist and critic from Trieste, speaks explicitly of prostitutes as inspirational figures, truly moral in their honest immorality.

It was only through his rhetorical exaltation of prostitution that Tavolato could express his desire for an alternative to hetero-normative sexualities. His larger program against sexual morality is an important contribution in the early “deconstructive” phase of Futurism, one which mirrors what Claudia Salaris calls a “theory of androgyny,”<sup>1</sup> associated at the time with writers such as Otto Weininger, Valentine de Saint-Point, and Marinetti himself, who was initially referred to by many as the “pink poet” because of “his ‘American’ methods, scandalizing and self-promoting.”<sup>2</sup> Like Marinetti’s own fictional Futurist father, Marfarka, who gives birth to Garzurmah, the man-machine hybrid, Marinetti’s birthing of the movement was aided by his assumption of a hybrid personality. This early bisexuality that attends the birth of Futurism later becomes a source of anxiety for Marinetti, who must then lead Futurism away from its Symbolist and Decadent dandy fathers.

What is curious, however, is the extent to which, considering the general widespread nature of these theories of androgyny, how “closeted” much of the academic discourse remains when discussing early Futurism, especially that of the Italians themselves. References to Tavolato’s homosexuality are often in codified language. Sebastiano Vassalli, in his historical novel *L’alcova elettrica* about Tavolato’s trial for public indecency caused by his *Elogio della prostituzione* does not mention his homosexuality at all. He even goes so far as to give him a beard, a girlfriend, “una fidanzata immoralista” who accompanies him to the *Giubbe Rosse* and shares the spotlight with Tavolato after his acquittal.<sup>3</sup> Vassalli’s reticence in addressing homosexuality indicates a larger problem within studies of Futurism — the difficulty in distinguishing homo-social from homosexual. It is a central tension within the Futurist movement itself, and one that the movement was forced to deal with, considering the inclusion of both professed and allegedly homosexual writers such as Tavolato, Palazzeschi, Papini, Soffici, and others. The split between Florentine and Milanese Futurists can be understood in this vein — the rift between a “queer” Futurism based around *Lacerba* and the Marinettian version that can be contradictorily read as a “traditional” or hegemonic Futurism. In fact, the Florentine Futurists refer to this themselves in the 1915 polemic “Futurismo e Marinettismo.”<sup>4</sup> To this effect, Salaris writes:

Palazzeschi, Papini, e Soffici. . .contrappongono ciò che a loro avviso è il vero futurismo al marinettismo: supercultura contro ignoranza, immagini in libertà contro parole in libertà, originalità contro stranezza formale, *ironia contro profetismo* libertà contro solidarietà e disciplina, antireligiosismo integrale e amoralismo contro religiosità laica e moralismo (my emphasis).<sup>5</sup>

Papini’s article points to the self-aware construction of an alternative (although it is doubtful that he would have agreed with the characterization “queer”) within the cultural milieu of the period. Yet Marinetti as *capomovimento* acquires as monumental a status for many modern intellectuals as he did for his fellow Futurists — like the Leaning Tower, he must be “held upright” by some academics to keep him from toppling over, from becoming too suspect regarding his personal sexuality or the ramifications of his movement’s theoretical “queer” production. Yet it is

precisely this overcompensation by intellectuals within the movement and since following Marinetti's own anti-gay rhetoric, that points to the queer nature of the first phase of Futurism. Marinetti's dismissal of decadence, Symbolism, sentimentality, and "professorialism," as well as his apparent *jouissance* in writing his anti-gay novel, *L'isola dei baci*, stems from a need to justify his own departure from his literary fathers as well as establish his own literary hegemony.<sup>6</sup> Like Queen Gertrude, however, "the lady doth protest too much." By reading between the lines, it is possible to reconstruct a queer narrative within the history of Futurism that both explains and illuminates studies of Futurism conducted up until this point.

Recent studies in queer theory shed some light on the relationship between the periodization of Futurism and its relationship with homosexuality. Lee Edelman, in his work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, discusses politics, "reproductive futurism," and the symbol of the child. Queer theory must present itself as an alternative to the tyranny of reproductive futurism, with its scope as the founding of a better world for our children. He states:

[At] the heart of my polemical engagement with the cultural text of politics and the politics of cultural texts lies a simple provocation: that *queerness* names the side of those *not* "fighting for the children," the side outside the consensus which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism. . . [so that] queerness. . . figures outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order's death drive.<sup>7</sup>

The praise of war, the *élan vital*, and the contempt for woman and sentimentality present in the destructive, first phase of Italian Futurism all point to the queerness of the artistic and literary movement that comes to be replaced with political engagement following World War I. Yet queerness also signifies resistance to bourgeois morality and traditional moral codes within the context of Futurism, and Tavolato sought to combat precisely this with his literary production, especially in his praise of prostitution. As Edelman writes: "Queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure."<sup>8</sup> Tavolato's

attempt to *épater le bourgeois* reveals this innate hypocrisy within society. Prostitutes are for the sexual social network an inextricable yet alternative and hence “lower” or “marginal” sexuality, a threat that reinforces the illusion of the stability of marriage, the institution whose scope is the reproduction of children. Prostitutes, often depicted as sterile by theorists such as Lombroso, do not contribute to “the future.”<sup>9</sup> They are queer, outside of the norm.

Marinetti’s rhetorical rejection of homosexuality functions in the same way — it reinforces the virile and homo-social while maintaining the hetero-normative standards of the period. Marinetti makes use of the subversive quality of the queer for its ability to scandalize (hence the accusations of his being a “pink poet”) but limits his queerness to the symbolic, going to great lengths to differentiate himself from the queer on a real level. Edelman calls for a queer theory that resists this “logic of opposition” and rather than placing hope in some future that knows no form, proposes a refusal “of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined, and by extension, history as a linear narrative (the poor man’s teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself — as itself — through time.”<sup>10</sup> The future, as envisioned by Futurists during the first “heroic” phase of Futurism ending around 1915 upon Italy’s entry into the war, had little quantitative or real qualities, and was relegated rather to a utopic possibility. The second phase saw the entry into the real, into the political, with World War I as the catalyst for change within the movement. Between 1915, the year of the feud with *Lacerba*, and 1918, the year of the publication of *L’isola dei baci*, the rift between the queer Futurists and Marinetti widens. Marinetti’s programmatic rejection of his Decadent, Symbolist literary fathers, such as Oscar Wilde, d’Annunzio, Mallarmé, and Baudelaire by proclaiming them symptomatic of *passatismo nietzschiano*, as well as his entry into the political, are symptoms of the end of queer Futurism that takes place during this period.<sup>11</sup> As Papini’s 1915 article, “Futurismo e Marinettismo,” makes clear, in defining himself as the Futurist, the prophetic Marinetti necessarily had to go about the operation of queering those ironic “Others” that had been a fundamental part of the movement at its inception.

#### TAVOLATO — A CLOSET CASE

In her work on homosexual writing, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses the function of the sentimental within the

“regime of heterosexual male self-pity” that characterizes the modern male today. Since modernity results in the loss of autonomous male identity not in relation to the Other, whether it be woman or gay man, Sedgwick claims that the association of the male or female body with sentimentality can be traced back to a psychological schism caused by a “change of gears, occupying the period from the 1880s through the First World War,” through which “the exemplary instance of the sentimental ceases to be woman per se, but instead becomes the body of a man who [. . .] physically dramatizes, embodies for an audience that both desires and cathartically identifies with him, a struggle of masculine identity with emotions or physical stigmata stereotyped as female.<sup>12</sup> The struggles of this “decadent” individual (Sedgwick, like Marinetti, offers Oscar Wilde as a foremost example of this phenomenon) produce a cathartic release similar to that of a sacrifice, a *figura Christi*, complete with “*lacrimae Christi* whose secretion is such a specialty of religious kitsch.”<sup>13</sup> Marinetti’s Futurist scorn for sentimentality stems from this rejection of the movement’s queer, closeted literary fathers. Yet Italo Tavolato’s relationship with his queer literary and theoretical predecessors is more complicated. As a homosexual man, he too was still confined to the closet and had to find some other mode of catharsis. Instead of mortification of the flesh, he chose to celebrate it.

Sebastiano Vassalli is not the only Italian intellectual to talk around Tavolato’s homosexuality. Alberto Viviani, in his work *Giubbe Rosse: Il caffè della rivoluzione culturale nella Firenze 1913-1915*, relegates Tavolato to the closet, only alluding to what was apparently a well-known homosexuality.<sup>14</sup> One can sense Tavolato’s queerness if one reads between the lines in Viviani’s description of the philosophy student from Trieste, whom he describes in the following manner:

Non era uomo fortunato. Dubbi e smarrimenti improvvisi lo colpivano ogni tanto se gli capitava di porsi seriamente davanti il problema del suo *io*; e allora conduceva per lunghi periodi una vita di clausura che aveva alla fine il suo corollario in una serie di atti disordinatissimi a base di orgie, di nottambulismi, di notti completamente bianche addirittura in serie.<sup>15</sup>

His “problema dell’io” alluded to by Viviani can be understood as a tacit reference to his homosexuality. His *flaneur* lifestyle and his sexual

proclivities were well known, yet not socially acceptable and relegated to the closet. Tavolato's doubts and psychological difficulties resulted in a depressive personality and the tendency towards suicide, which was "constant and assailing" but "if he never put it into practice it was likely the fault of that subtle vein of cowardice (*vigliaccheria*) that sometimes. . . flowered in his character."<sup>16</sup> Tavolato's "cowardice," his unwillingness to commit suicide, is attributed to his homosexuality. In his role as historian, Viviani cracks the closet door, lets his friend Tavolato get a foot out, then slams it in his face. The accusation of *vigliaccheria* was also leveled at Palazzeschi by the Milanese Futurists, who was both anti-war and homosexual.<sup>17</sup> Tavolato's best protection, then, was to overcompensate. Only those close to him could understand his praise of sexual freedom as truly an act of rebellion.

This celebration of lust was not unique to Tavolato. His numerous articles against sexual morality follow on the heels of Valentine de Saint-Point's two manifestoes, "Manifesto of the Futurist Woman" (1912) and the "Manifesto of Lust" (1913). Lust becomes a counterpoint to sentimentality — the physical desire of woman is the engine of change. As Salaris describes de Saint-Point, she could be seen as a female version of Marinetti, further evidence that Futurism has at its origins an essentially androgynous concept of gender. "Poetessa delle forze della natura e del desiderio in quanto slancio vitale, la de Saint-Point è molto vicina al Marinetti dei primi poemi in francese proprio per il senso d'energia panteistica, l'esaltazione dell'io, il volontarismo, il vitalismo. Dietro entrambi c'è. . . Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, e Bergson."<sup>18</sup> This revolutionary spirit that inhabits the early works of Marinetti and the manifestoes of de Saint-Point lead to the latter author's assumption of the figure of the prostitute as new emblem of carnal drive and lack of sentimentality. In her "Manifesto of the Futurist Woman," de Saint-Point proclaims that the "woman who retains man through her tears and her sentimentality is inferior to the prostitute who incites her man, through bragging, to retain his domination over the lower depths of the cities with his revolver at the ready: at least she cultivates an energy that could serve better causes."<sup>19</sup> The subversive qualities of this statement (along with her other claims of forging a new sort of femininity based on warrior values and of rejecting the traditionally feminine or closeted value of sentimentality) blaze a trail for Tavolato to follow, which he does in the following year, 1913.

In Tavolato's first article for *Lacerba*, "L'anima di Weininger," the Triestine intellectual pays homage to the closeted queer theorist of the turn of the century *par excellence*, Otto Weininger. His theories on gender approximation, found in his posthumous work of 1900 entitled *Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character)*<sup>20</sup> "created an extraordinary fascination that seduced intellectuals from different cultural formations."<sup>21</sup> This fascination derives from a re-evaluation of gender roles in this particular period, not surprising considering the cultural milieu wherein feminism, prostitution, emancipation, and suffrage were hotly debated topics. In his critical work on Weininger entitled *La filosofia del pressappoco*, Alberto Cavaglion declares Weininger's theories to be "the testimony *in extremis* of the irrational propheticism that characterized the end of the nineteenth-century."<sup>22</sup> With his philosophy of gender approximation, or *pressappoco*, disguised as science, this heir of Lombroso and antagonist of Freud wrote the "book-scandal with which the curtain rises on the twentieth-century."<sup>23</sup> Rather than a totalizing vision of self in which one is all man or all woman, Weininger's *Sex and Character* offers a bisexual or hermaphroditic concept of self, in which all traditionally negative qualities, such as physicality, irrationality, lust, anarchy, and spontaneity pertain to one's feminine side, and the traditionally positive qualities such as reason, spirit, and genius, are all masculine. These approximate measurements of masculinity and femininity also served to justify misogyny and anti-Semitism by causing an interiorization of the categorical gender divide as they simultaneously destabilized the external nature of these categories. It also explained homosexual desire, since both male and female elements can be attributed to the same person. In the words of Giuseppe Prezzolini, "il valore di Weininger è che insegna a dividere il mondo in due parti personali."<sup>24</sup> This theory of the divided self, characteristic of modern man as well as the schizophrenic, would have been especially appealing to closeted homosexuals such as Tavolato.

While for Prezzolini, "il nemico della femmina," and other writers such as Papini, access to Weininger's theories lead to the suppression of "feminine" carnal traits such as lust, Weininger serves as a negative example for Tavolato *il triestino*. The German theorist committed suicide a few months after his return home from his "Grand Italian Tour," tradition for what Papini calls "Siegfredi convalescenti."<sup>25</sup> Weininger shot himself in the chest in the same Viennese building where Beethoven also met his end. This Werther-ian suicide completes Weininger's desired



auto-apotheosis, his self-portrait as a turn-of-the-century ascetic or *figura Christi*. The Romantic sentimentality produced by such a suicide is exactly that invoked by Sedgwick as producing scorn in the heterosexual male. In the first edition of *Lacerba* from January 1, 1913, Tavolato expresses his affinity for Weininger, his sense that they are spiritual brothers, while simultaneously turning the sexual philosopher on his head in his work "L'anima di Weininger." While he does not share Weininger's romantic idolatry for suicide, he expresses his sympathy and understanding for the German theorist's suicidal impulse. Tavolato writes of Weininger, "la sessualità e l'amore, i più forti vincoli che legano i mortali al mondo caduco saranno infranti per un amore superiore: quello del valore, dell'immortalità vera."<sup>26</sup> In the choice between corruption of the flesh and self-immolation, Weininger chose the latter, fulfilling the sentimental "closeted" journey of Sedgwick's Romantic, gay, Christ figures.

Yet this does not entirely satisfy Tavolato. In the paragraph that follows, he decries Weininger's asceticism, exclaiming, "Lo odio. È un debole, uno che fa propaganda per l'al di là"<sup>27</sup> and continues to make an argument for the expression of one's carnality as an expression of the dual nature of humanity. "Date a dio ciò che è di dio, e al diavolo ciò che è del diavolo. . . . *Sia questa la nostra umanità: oscillare tra gli estremi*" (my emphasis).<sup>28</sup> Returning to Lee Edelman's logic of opposition, Tavolato fulfills the queer theorist's refusal to be defined completely by opposing oneself to the identity of another.

Tavolato's simultaneous embrace and refusal of Weininger mirrors the strategy of negation used by Palazzeschi in *Il codice di Perelà*, a work whose protagonist is simultaneously material and immaterial, present and evanescent. The negative image of Weininger, the phantom of the poet-philosopher-ascetic who deprived himself of pleasure at the cost of his life, lurks behind the rest of Tavolato's journalistic production for *Lacerba*, and is especially evident in his next three articles, "Contro la morale sessuale," "Glossa sopra il manifesto futurista della lussuria," e "L'elogio della prostituzione."

A few points which emerge in "Contro la morale sessuale" and "Glossa sopra il manifesto futurista della lussuria" will continue to characterize Tavolato's contributions to *Lacerba*, above all his theme of invective against the hypocrisy of moralists. In particular, he states in the first article "Contro la morale sessuale" from the February 1, 1913 edition of *Lacerba*, "i moralisti han torto. La sessualità non si vince soltanto con l'astinenza ma anche con la lussuria."<sup>29</sup> Pleasure, pederasty,

masturbation, sadism, masochism, and other signs of “depravity” become for Tavolato mere expressions of human instinct. Those who claim to be morally upstanding are dishonest, because unlike Weininger, they survive and aren’t swept away in spiritual ecstasy. In closing, Tavolato states, “diventerò moralista il giorno in cui uno mi dimostrerà d’aver pensato durante il coito alla generazione futura.”<sup>30</sup> His use of humor, his de-sacralization of sex not as a mere mode of reproduction but rather for pure pleasure (or as Edelman would say, reproductive futurism) all contribute to the sense of queerness that pervades his journalistic production.

In his “Glossa sopra il manifesto della lussuria,” printed in the March 15, 1913 edition of *Lacerba*, Tavolato declares his solidarity with de Saint-Point’s “Manifesto of Lust,” her second manifesto following her 1912 “Manifesto of the Futurist Woman.”<sup>31</sup> This edition of *Lacerba* is especially noteworthy since it is the first example of Milanese-Florentine Futurist collaboration in the journal, and contains articles by Marinetti, Boccioni, and Corra, among others. In addressing the “Manifesto of Lust,” Tavolato again aligns himself with de Saint-Point, openly declaring battle against moralists. “Cessiamo di schernire il desiderio’ vuol dunque dire: combattiamo la morale sessuale.” This is the beginning of Tavolato’s open declaration of queer warfare, accompanied by his inauguration of a metaphor of religious parody, in which he continues the negative example of Weininger as *figura Christi*:

Credo credo credo che una ventina di vizi valga cento chiese e mille redenzioni, credo che il coito sia azione intellettualmente e moralmente superiore alla creazione d’una nuova etica, con tutta la forza dell’anima mia credo: nel dovere di non impoverire nella suggestione morale; nella comunione carnale che vivifica lo spirito; nella remissione delle virtù, nella vita terrena. Amen.

By closing with “Amen” he provokes the religious members of his audience by parodying the Christian rite, offering up a goddess of pleasure as an alternative to the ascetic Christ. It is a motif he will carry to extreme ends in his next article, “Elogio della prostituzione” (or “In praise of prostitution”).

Here, Tavolato is turning the humanist tradition on its head. The English translation of the title brings to mind Erasmus’ anti-clerical

text “In Praise of Folly,” in Greek “Moraie Encomium,” itself a satire critical of the institutional morality and political power of the Roman Catholic Church. Like Erasmus, whose Folly is accompanied by Hedone (Pleasure) and Tryphe (Wantonness), Tavolato’s sermon is of the flesh. Since prostitutes are traditionally subjects of vitriolic invectives in Biblical and Christian literature, such as Dante’s famous portrayal of Thais in the circle of lust, his May 1, 1913 article reverses both the mode (invective to elegy) and the tradition (Catholic to pagan).<sup>32</sup> Tavolato’s emphasis is (on the here and now) made pleasurable by the company of *puttane* rather than projecting into the future or the afterlife.

The article begins at dawn, when the “respectable classes” of society head to work or to school, the institutions of a liberal, democratic society, while “le puttane, stanche, sognano il fauno,” the Classical symbol of ribaldry and male potency.<sup>33</sup> This juxtaposition of contemporary Christian society and Classical symbolism continues *a pari passo* with the introduction of Lilly and Zaza, “sisters of the night” who accompany the church bells of dawn, which Tavolato calls “ruffiane di santità” pimps of sanctity, soliciting asceticism and condemning desire. He goes on to say, “ma, di nascosto, la fantasia faceva porcherie con Maria Vergine e col buon Gesù.” The cult of the Virgin Mother and the Holy Child, icons of reproductive futurism because of their function as symbols of a religion that upholds sex for reproductive purposes only, are queered in their sexuality, rendered mortal as objects of desire. Moralism, upheld by Kant’s categorical imperative and Christ’s innocence, is cast as a passing ethical fad. The superior ethic of prostitution has survived according to the principles of Bergsonian *durée*. “Tutte le morali variano, mutano, decadono, spariscono; la prostituzione resta. Perciò, se durata è indice di valore, la prostituzione è superiore all’etica.” Unlike Christ, who demands subjection to his reign with the amorphous promise of Heavenly paradise in an uncertain future, and Kant, who promises a peaceful conscience at the cost of a life not fully lived, “Zaza, puttana, non promette nulla e mantiene. Ricompensa; dieci franchi.” The lack of shame and the honesty of the transaction make of the prostitute a new golden idol of modernity and capitalism. Tavolato’s prostitute delivers on her promise to fulfill one’s desire in the present, unlike other religious and philosophical idols whose promises dwell in the future.

He goes on to discuss the issue of payment, asking: “Dove mai c’è vergogna e bassezza, dove obbrobrio e indegnità, se la puttana vende il suo corpo?” Revealing the similarities between prostitution and the

institution of matrimony, he declares: “La superstizione, che vero amore non debba avere nulla a che fare con quattrini, deriva da completa ignoranza o da mascheramento della realtà — non costa anche la moglie?” By destabilizing what were thought of as mutually exclusive female gender roles, wife/mother and prostitute, Tavolato recalls the fluid binaries of Weininger, but goes on to exalt the prostitute further by comparing her sexual generosity to an act of charity. “Tu apri la mano e sazi di benevolenza ogni vivente.” Marriage, an institution associated with hetero-normative standards of sexuality and reproductive futurism, is revealed to be a farce, a masked form of prostitution. Later, Futurists such as Marinetti and Volt will pick up this theme of *amore libero* and the abolition of marriage in “Democrazia Futurista” and *Roma Futurista*. These later writings, however, are characterized by a female subordination to a patriarchal state that would relegate her to the position of baby factory. Tavolato’s rejection of marriage, based as it is upon the honesty and simplicity of the sexual transaction, offers a realm of love and sexual desire autonomous from reproductive futurism and therefore, queer.

Tavolato closes his elegy with a desacralization of the Catholic high mass portion of the *Salve Regina*, in which the Queen Mother, whose sexuality is both pure, yet reproductive, is replaced by a prostitute. “Sincera,” “eroica,” “formosissima,” “comoda,” “impudica,” “lontana,” “stupida,” “artificiosa,” puttana, “Ave,” Tavolato states. He continues:

Chi va sparlando, che la prostituzione sia un male necessario è un malfattore. E chi afferma che sia un’istituzione sociale si rende responsabile di calunnia. I tentativi di surrogare la prostituzione son tutti falliti. La puttana resta. Varia di stile; diventa mondana, da sacra che era; si chiama etera, entra nel ditterione; fa la cortegiana; viene confinata nella *maison de tolerance*; si muta in bagascia, mantenuta, donna allegra, donna perduta, farfallina, cocotte; la trovi per istrada e nei palazzi, nei lupanari, nei bordelli, nei casini, nelle case di ricreazione — muta di stile, d’abito; l’essenza resta; la puttana è eterna.

In a movement in which everything is meant to perish, the prostitute perhaps serves as both an antithesis to and an example of the dynamism and temporality of Futurism. The persistent value of the subversive or the prostitute as queer “resistance to the viability of the social order”

was fundamental to this initial phase of Futurism, with de Saint-Point and Tavolato as its harbingers.<sup>34</sup> To insist upon this queer futurism versus reproductive futurism, it is also revelatory to note that Benito Mussolini, who in 1914 was a socialist journalist writing for *Avanti!*, followed Tavolato's trial. The edition of *Avanti!* that announced Tavolato's acquittal on all charges of gross indecency on page five contains on page three the review of a new work by August Forel entitled, "La questione sessuale." The review ends with the following statement: "nell'uomo, come in ogni essere vivente, lo scopo precipuo di ogni funzione sessuale e quindi l'amore sessuale è la riproduzione della specie."<sup>35</sup> Mussolini's ideas of reproduction and Marinetti's theories about homosexuality and gender roles slowly, over the next ten years, align with each other, so that Futurism becomes more about reproductive futurism than about provocation as it was initially.

#### MARINETTI AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PINK

As previously stated, the split between Florentine Futurists and Milanese or Marinettian Futurists takes place because of a suspicion. This suspicion of queerness, whether it be homosexuality, *passatismo*, or otherwise, can be read in the numerous exchanges between Florentine and Milanese Futurists on the pages of *Lacerba* as well as the personal correspondence of Marinetti found in the Getty Center Archives. In particular, the general attitude of scorn for what Balilla Pratella calls in his letter of March 6, 1915 "i pulcidi di Firenze" ("the Florentine fleas") is palpable.<sup>36</sup> Apparently written after the feud has broken out between the two groups of Futurists, the bellicose style of this letter contrasts sharply with the earlier letters written to Marinetti by Tavolato, which are heavy in sycophantic praise and affection. Tavolato in fact signs many of his letters "Affettuosamente tuo" or "Tuo Tavolato."<sup>37</sup> After 1915, however, Tavolato disappears from Marinetti's correspondence and heads to Capri where he lives, on and off, for the duration of the war. This falling out between the groups echoes in Pratella's prose, and in that same letter he states: "Carrà, Govoni, Severini, e Tavolato veranno cancellati dalla mia conoscenza ed amicizia."<sup>38</sup> He is also careful to maintain a masculine stance in his closing and writes: "T'abbraccio *fraternamente*" (my emphasis).<sup>39</sup> This fraternal embrace recalls Marinetti's own *saluto*, "Un forte stretto di mano dal vostro F.T. Marinetti," perhaps the most masculine of all. The split between the groups of Futurists because of a suspicious femininity, decadence, or "professorialism" on the part of the

Florentines who refuse to tow the line as he would have wanted, may explain Marinetti's impulse to write the novel *L'isola dei baci*, alongside fellow Futurist Bruno Corra.

This homophobic work from 1918 takes place in Naples and Capri, shifting the scene from northern/central Italy to the classical world of the Mediterranean. This hybrid island, much loved by the Futurists, represented for them both the creative volcanic material, the magma of its making, and the uniting of Italy with North Africa, Marinetti's origins. It is worth noting that Tavolato, too, was on Capri during these years, where he founded a short-lived journal entitled *Eros*.<sup>40</sup> In the preface to *L'isola dei baci*, written specifically as a "romanzo erotico-sociale," Corra states that "questo libro mi piace moltissimo. . . Mi è più simpatico di tutti gli altri miei e di tutti gli altri di Marinetti. . . mi soddisfa. . . È le ragioni?.. È un libro che rimane *fuori dalla letteratura*" (Corra's emphasis).<sup>41</sup> The "outsidedness" of the work allows the two authors to explore the closeted subject matter in a literary form that more closely resembles a play or a variety show (not surprising since it is very close to the publication of the "Manifesto of Variety Theater"). Marinetti and Corra act more as spectators throughout the work rather than as agents — they observe more than they act. Their only actions involve the female characters in the text. Marinetti kisses Signora De Ritten, wife of one of the homosexual members of the "Pink Congress," *il Congresso Rosa*, and both Marinetti and Corra go to Naples to gather their prostitute-army for the attack on the homosexual political entity.<sup>42</sup> Besides these two events, Marinetti and Corra are relegated, like the reader, to the role of spectator. This imbues the work with the sought-after quality of simultaneity and *divertimento* that Corra states as the primary motivation for the writing of the book in the introduction.

The function of the Congresso Rosa in *Isola dei baci* recalls the Edelman theory of politics and reproductive futurism. The Congresso Rosa hopes to establish on Capri an exclusively male, anti-Futurist, pro-passatist state, based on pacifism and the glorification of Germany and Austria "per la loro saggezza reazionaria-poliziesca, il loro spirito d'ordine, i caratteri gotici dei loro giornali, [e] la saggia pedanteria dei suoi professori."<sup>43</sup> This is yet another example of Marinetti equating professorialism with homosexuality. It is also worth noting that the praise of Austro-German influence is yet another attribute of the Congresso Rosa.<sup>44</sup> This "queer" congress founds a state incapable of reproduction, politically disengaged (cosmopolitan rather than nationalistic), and

unconcerned about the future. It is very much like the future proposed by Edelman when he states that a queer future “delights in that mortality as the negation of everything that would define itself, moralistically, as pro-life.”<sup>45</sup> And as Edelman would likely predict, these queers must die.

Through the death of the German homosexual and the two German prostitutes, Marinetti and Corra make a spectacle of the death drive of these queer sexualities. The prostitutes themselves represent a queer sexuality, albeit a more socially acceptable one, since their sexual activity does not lead (ideally) to the production of children. Like the Congresso Rosa, the prostitute known to the Futurists is also named Rosa, the color once associated with Marinetti, the “Pink” poet. Here Marinetti exacts literary revenge on his pink cohorts. In the chapter entitled “L’intervento,” the prostitutes, in a bacchanal of violence, destroy the Apollonic social order created by the Congresso Rosa. “Noi avevamo pensato di fare una burla atrocemente futurista e una dimostrazione antipassatista. Ma il vino di Capri aveva impazzito le donne. La commedia diventava tragica.”<sup>46</sup> The prostitutes have nearly pushed Markoff, a member of the Congresso Rosa, off a cliff when Marinetti and Corra try to intervene as characters. As authors, however, it is they, not the German prostitutes, who cause the literary death of all three German members of the party. The death of these Germans, queer in their sexual identity as well as their nationality, results in the obtaining of a medal for Castretta, the aptly-named Neopolitan detective who had been investigating the group and with whom Marinetti and Corra had allied themselves. The death of the queers thus brings about the restoration of social order.

While there is still much to say about this work, one point in particular seems salient to the argument about reproductive futurism and the image of the child. Marinetti, despite his avant-garde status, was fairly traditional in his home life. He had a wife and three daughters. While he may have written against marriage and for free love in 1918’s “Democrazia futurista,” he did not practice what he preached and was himself married in 1923. In this vein, it is telling that in a 1910 pamphlet “Contro il lusso delle donne,” luxury, for Marinetti, becomes a feminizing element that turns men into pederasts.<sup>47</sup> In *L’isola dei baci*, Signora De Ritten, upon discovering her husband’s homosexuality, proclaims “Canailles! . . . Vous n’êtes que des cochons, des péderastes!”<sup>48</sup> The use of pederasty as the definition of homosexuality is telling as it furthers the protective element present in Edelman’s reproductive

futurism. Not only should sex produce offspring, but the offspring must then be protected from pederasts. This is still an argument that pervades modern discussions of homosexuality and children. Homosexuals are seen a double threat — they themselves are unproductive sexually but also threaten to corrupt our youth. Like the postcard sent home from the trenches, found in the Getty Archives, that depicts an Italian soldier holding a baby, symbol of a future Italy that the soldier proclaims will be “stronger” and “more respected,” Futurism’s founder gradually moves away from the queer origins of his movement towards a reproductive futurism because of his allegiance with the conservative forces of Fascism. Italy’s future, the figure of the child in the arms of the soldier, proved irreconcilable with queerness, for as Edelman writes “the future is mere repetition and is just as lethal as the past.”<sup>49</sup> The Fascist experiment and World War II confirm for us that Edelman’s conception of the future was not far off.

## Notes

1. Claudia Salaris, *Storia del futurismo: Libri, giornali, manifesti* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1985), 54. All quotes from Salaris (if translated) are my translations. My elaboration of a queer Futurism is largely based on Salaris’ periods as elaborated in this text — the initial “destructive” phase followed by a second “rebuilding” phase, representing a *ritorno all’ordine* that accompanied the movement’s politicization following the First World War and its gradual aligning of itself with Fascism.

2. *Ibid.*, 22.

3. Sebastiano Vassali, *L’alcova elettrica* (Torino: Einaudi Editore, 1986), 186.

4. Giovanni Papini, “Futurismo e Marinettismo,” *Lacerba* 3, no. 7, 1915.

5. Salaris, *Storia del futurismo*, 72.

6. I will argue that “professorialism,” since it is associated with both the Florentine group in both Marinetti’s correspondence and a *passatismo nietschiano e orfeico*, is simply codified language for homosexuality.

7. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. In his work *La donna delinquente*, Lombroso explains the phenomenon of low fecundity in prostitutes not as a sign of their atavism, but rather a



byproduct of a lifestyle that exposes the prostitute to disease and is not conducive to carrying babies to term.

10. Ibid., 4.

11. Evidence of this trend can be found in articles such as “Noi rinneghiamo i nostri maestri simbolisti ultimi amanti della luna” (1915), “Abbasso il tango e Parsifal!” (1914), “Contro i professori” and “Ideologie sfasciate dalla conflagrazione” from “La guerra, sola igiene del mondo” (1915).

12. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 146.

13. Ibid.

14. Alberto Viviani, *Giubbe Rosse: Il caffè della rivoluzione culturale nella Firenze 1913-1915* (Milano: Nuove Edizioni Culturali, 2007).

15. Ibid., 181

16. Ibid. My translation.

17. Cangiullo's letter to Marinetti from the Getty Archives, dated March 2, 1915, in which he writes “Palazzeschi è un vigliacco. Lo confessa. È noto.”

18. Salaris, *Storia del futurismo*, 54.

19. Valentine de Saint-Point, “Manifesto of the Futurist Woman (Response to F.T. Marinetti)” (1912). Found at [bobbybelote.com/!!teaching/Readings/FirstWoman.pdf](http://bobbybelote.com/!!teaching/Readings/FirstWoman.pdf).

20. Ladislaus Lob, trans., *Sex and Character of Otto Weininger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

21. Bruno Wanrooij, *La storia del pudore* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1990), 206.

22. Alberto Cavaglion, *La filosofia del pressapoco: Weininger, sesso, carattere e la cultura del Novecento* (Napoli: l'Ancora, 2001), 7. My translation.

23. Ibid., 7-8.

24. Giuseppe Prezzolini, cited by Guglielmo Ferrero in *Europa giovane* (Milano: Garzanti, 1946), 319.

25. Giovanni Papini, *24 Cervelli* (Firenze, Valecchi, 1928), 321, cited in Cavaglion, *La filosofia*, 5.

26. Italo Tavolato, “L'anima di Weininger,” *Lacerba* 1 (Firenze: Valecchi, 1 gennaio 1913).

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Italo Tavolato, “Contro la morale sessuale,” *Lacerba* 1, no. 3 (Firenze, Valecchi, 1 febbraio 1913).

30. Ibid.

31. This manifesto proclaims the primacy of lust as the engine that drives creation, whether it be artistic production, biological reproduction, or political and military conquest. For this French futurist, lust is a necessary accompaniment to the violence of battle, the physical expression of the act of natural selection, which explains why Saint-Point goes so far as to justify the rape of native populations by their conquering enemies. “L’arte e la guerra sono le grandi manifestazioni della sensualità; la lussuria è il loro fiore.” As an eternal indication of physical rigor and human instinct, lust has been for too long clad in the dreary cloak of sentimentality. In an act of stripping away these passing sentimental fads, Saint-Point states that, “in un essere sano e giovane, ogni volta che la lussuria è in opposizione con la sentimentalità, la lussuria vince.” She goes on: “La sentimentalità segue le mode, la lussuria è eterna,” a theme that Tavolato will re-elaborate and apply to prostitution as “mestiere eterno.” In an anticipation of the Lacanian theory of *jouissance*, Saint-Point declares that lust is the ideal of the flesh, “la perpetua battaglia mai vinta” “la Chimera magnifica, sempre afferrata, mai presa, che gli esseri giovani e quelli avidi, inebbriati di lei, inseguono senza posa.” Lust becomes the expression of Bergson’s *élan vital*, a theory the French philosopher had recently expounded in his *Creative Evolution* of 1907. Tavolato finds a kindred spirit in Saint-Point, one with whom he shares ideas about the positive values of desire and intuition. These female-penned manifestos fail to make much impression on Italian society, however, since they are never printed in a formal publication and only distributed loose-leaf. In other countries, they are attributed to Marinetti, completely doing away with their “queer” nature (if by queer we understand non-heteronormative sexualities).

32. Lucia Re discusses the manner in which this film signals a return to the Dannunzian, decadent model of the *femme fatale* that the Futurists had programmatically rejected in her article “Futurism, Film, and the Return of the Repressed: Learning from Thais,” *MLN* 123, no. 1 (2008): 125—50.

33. Italo Tavolato, “Elogio della prostituzione,” *Lacerba* 1, no. 5 (Firenze, Valecchi, 1 maggio 1913). All subsequent citations are from this volume and number.

34. Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

35. Benito Mussolini, “I libri che si stampano,” *Avanti* (11 gennaio 1914), reproduced in Vassalli, *L’alcova elettrica*.

36. Balilla Pratella, Letter 870358-70, Marinetti Correspondence, The Getty Center Archives.

37. Examples of this can be found in letters of group 870358.68, Italo Tavolato, Marinetti Correspondence, The Getty Center Archives.

38. Pratella, Letter 870358-70.

39. Ibid.

40. Salaris, *Storia del futurismo*, 111.

41. Marinetti, F.T. and Bruno Corra, *Isola dei baci: Romanzo erotico-sociale* (Napoli: Edizioni La Conchiglia, 2003), 23.

42. It is interesting that the de-queering of Futurism also coincides with the formation of Marinetti's own image of himself as a Casanova. In the introduction to "Come si seducono le donne," Corra and Settimelli write: "Sino a oggi è sempre accaduto che i libri sulle donne son stati scritti da uomini che non le conoscevano affatto o che erano rimasti massacrati da un unico amore infelice. Weininger informi. Filosofi ripugnanti, occhialuti e zizzeruti, tisici, malinconici, nostalgici e senza alcuna energia virile" (quoted by Cavaglion, *La filosofia*, 41)

43. Ibid., 93.

44. The similarities between the gays of the Congresso Rosa and Tavolato are astounding — Tavolato was also of a professorial nature and had a German cultural background. He was also on Capri during the war.

45. Edelman, *No Future*, 31.

46. Marinetti and Corra, *Isola dei baci*, 125.

47. "L'uomo moltiplicato e il Regno della macchina" first appeared as a pamphlet in 1910, under the Direzione del Movimento Futurista in Milan. Subsequently it was published in Marinetti's "Guerra, sola igiene del mondo" (Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia, Milan, 1915), 95-100. Here I am citing from *Futuriste. Letteratura. Arte. Vita*, ed. Giancarlo Carpi (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2009), 41-44.

48. Ibid., 98.

49. Edelman, *No Future*, 31.