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**Drama Translation
and Theatre Practice**

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**Italian Futurism on Stage:
*Synthetic Theatre in Translation***

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"We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!" we read in Marinetti's *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* of 1909.¹ At the opening of the Twentieth century, Futurism was confronting the issues of Modernity and challenging the basic foundation of Art and its role in the age of machines, modern communications, alienation and war. Today, a century has passed, but many of the themes and modes of Futurist Theatre still inspire contemporary performers around the world. For this reason, an analysis of the translation of Futurist Synthetic theatre (*Sintesi*) offers a valuable case study on both problems of translation theories and problems concerning the performability of the text.

Lefevere considers translation and stage performances as forms of 'rewriting', and underlines the importance of such rewriting as "the motor force behind literary evolution".² As we know, the craft of translating theatrical texts involves reflections on purely theoretical issues, i.e. an 'academic' analysis of the linguistic, semantic and stylistic features of a text and its rendering into a foreign language, and a more 'practical' analysis of the translated text as a dramatic unit that has to function on stage. "Both *mise en scène* and translation", Johnston writes, "are essentially concerned with the actualisation of a series of potentialities within the source text in a way which respects both the internal dramatic coherence and external theatrical complicity of the play".³

The *Sintesi* (written between 1915 and 1916), are a series of very brief acts, almost sketches aimed at capturing the diversity of human experience in concise scenes. The texts, some of them lasting only a few minutes, were intended to be performed by the authors themselves or by amateur actors in the course of the *Serate Futuriste* (Futurist evenings), that combined drama, music, politics, provocation, and assault on the audience.

The Synthetic plays are a clear example of theatrical texts whose vital essence must be found beyond the written page, and which can only exist in virtue of their performability. As Bassnett states, "the written text exists in a dialectical relationship with the performance of that text and those two elements – the written and the hypothetical performance – are coexistent and inseparable".⁴ In this case, Futurist playwrights specifically intended the *Sintesi* to be staged. In the Futurist conception of the dramatic arts, the performance, far from being viewed as 'hypothetical', was meant to be an integral part of the project. Indeed, the whole set of the theatrical sign-system (sounds and voices; dress code; lighting and stage design; facial expressions and gestures) is critical to understanding the language of the *Sintesi*. The on-stage performance must therefore be regarded as the first and most important 'translation' of the written text, and is vital to the preservation of its afterlife. Benjamin's notion of 'afterlife' refers to the idea that the text has a life which depends upon the translation for its survival.⁵ I use here the notion of translation in its wider sense, as an act of continual recreation and remoulding which invests both the source text and the receiving language system. As Kathleen Davis puts it: "translation transforms the receiving language as well as the original because through it different, incommensurate signifying systems interact, and because the translated foreign text necessarily *performs* new meanings in the target system."⁶

In the case of a text written in a language that is not widely spread, translation is fundamental. When translated for the English-speaking world, Futurist theatre came into contact with a whole new universe of experimental performances. The texts were contaminated by new influences and have been remoulded at all semiotic levels, and yet it is precisely this act of rewriting that has paradoxically guaranteed their surviving across different times and different cultures by preserving their inherent revolutionary nature. Since Synthetic theatre was written with the clear purpose of destabilizing the audience, the only 'fidelity' that has to be respected is the fidelity to its scope. The fact that the *Sintesi* are still performed today demonstrates that the 'translation' has been successfully conducted. The performances have been to some

extent adapted for the target culture, but there has been an effort to acquaint the audience with the Italian cultural specificity through a precise translation strategy: the written texts have been translated almost word-for-word, with no attempt at experimenting with the language.

The Futurist movement had burst violently into the European cultural scene on 20 February 1909, when the French newspaper *Le Figaro* carried on its front page the aggressive and inflammatory *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, which called for the destruction of all traditional arts, and the end of "museums, libraries, and academies of every kind".⁷ The Futurists sought nothing less than to revolutionise life and society in all their diverse aspects: moral, artistic, cultural, social, economic, and political. Launched by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the movement was the first expression of a radical, modernist spirit in the arts in Italy. It condemned the antiquated cult of the glorious Italian artistic past and the servile respect paid to fossilised cultural institutions, and called for intellectual rejuvenation by means of a new art that would celebrate technology, speed and the great advances of the modern world.

Although he had started his artistic career in the guise of a traditional Symbolist poet, otherworldly and overly refined, Marinetti gradually imbibed the tenets of radical modernism during his regular visits to Paris and was able to reinvent himself as an impresario with enormous organisational talent. After launching his Manifesto, he quickly gathered around himself a group of talented writers, painters, sculptors, poets, dramatists, architects and musical innovators – including Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Luigi Russolo and many others. Together, they declared war on the cultural establishment, against "the solemn, the sacred, and the Serious, the Sublime in Art with a capital A".⁸ The means to wage this struggle could not be conventional literature alone. The true transformation of art into life began only when Futurism started to challenge the traditional conventions of dramatic literature. Theatre, as a major performance form, quickly became the Futurists' favourite means of expression. Because of its immediacy, and the potential

physical involvement of the spectators, it was able to "maximise the sensory and to minimise the intellectual".⁹ The enterprise was highly innovative and paved the way for a new conception of theatre as multimedia spectacle. Likewise, the Futurists' novel use of colours, sounds, and dynamic movement led to the creation of multidimensional stage architecture. Many of the performance scenarios conceived by Balla, Boccioni and Francesco Cangiullo, were far in advance of their time in their use of simultaneity and compression, synthesising actions and events into the fewest possible number of dynamic words and sounds.

After several years of experimentation with the modes of music-hall, cabaret and café-concert, the Futurists had begun to search for a new model of 'synthetic' theatre which would offer even greater variety and open up new possibilities for shaking things up. The *Manifesto del Teatro Futurista* was written in 1915. It is the project for a theatre which "condenses the diversity of life in dynamic, fragmentary symphonies of gestures, words, noises and lights", and rejects a dramatic tradition that is "dogmatic, stupid, logical, meticulous pedantic, strangling".¹⁰ It questions the traditional role of theatre in society, the function of the performances in the life of its spectators, the relationship between stage and auditorium during the performance, and the communication structures employed by writers and directors. "Futurist theatre constituted a violent assault on the nerves of the spectators", writes Günther Berghaus:

by eliminating the barrier of the proscenium arch, they invaded the auditorium, took the spectators by the collars, and shook them out of their passivity and torpor. The Futurists created an atmosphere and environment which united actors and spectators in a common experience. This novel relationship between the stage and the audience turned even traditional playhouses into spaces for a modern and vibrant theatre. The Futurists abolished the 'fourth wall' conventions and offered their audiences an immediate sensation of a new and dynamic reality. The emphasis on the physical, sensory qualities of performances enhanced the non-representational character of theatre. Futurist performance was anti-psychological and anti-naturalistic, real rather than realistic. There was an emphasis on scenic spectacle rather than on literary texts. In this way, the Futurists rediscovered the 'theatrical' nature of theatre.¹¹

What remains today, almost a century after its genesis, of the Futurists' *Sintesi*? Should we consider them as a sterile and naive attempt of rebellion, or did they contain the seeds of a solid project for alternative theatre? To answer this question we need to analyse the structure of the plays more closely. Some of the texts, by virtue of their underlying political aims, appear fatefully tied to the contingency of their historical period. Whatever aesthetic innovation they exhibit is a mere technical device to convey an overtly political goal, e.g. protesting against the conservatism of the Italian government on the eve of the Great War. Other texts are a parody of traditional theatrical genres. The bourgeois comedy, a mixture of vaudeville and *pochade*, is systematically ridiculed and annihilated. An example of this is Boccioni's *The Body That Ascends*, where the typical vaudeville theme of the evening date is deconstructed into a series of instant tableaux, and the gentleman's body is sucked up to the fifth floor by the power of his lover's glance. Similarly, Bruno Corra and Emilio Settimelli parodied D'Annunzio's heroic style in a piece entitled *Toward Victory*, in which a young hero is determined to prove himself at any cost and to "sail alone, toward the ways of Heroism", while his mistress tries in vain to stop him with "sweet voice, resembling an intoxicating and enervating perfume". After a last, heartbreaking encounter, the hero resolutely leaves the room, only to die at the end of the staircase, "sliding on a fig skin".¹²

But there is a group of *Sintesi* that display genuine innovative tension. These are texts where the themes are no longer of importance, and all experimental efforts concentrate on the structure. Here the investigation of new techniques in the writing and staging of the pieces is evident. In Balla's *To Understand Weeping*, for instance, the setting is reduced to a mere square frame, half red and half green, where the two characters, the Man Dressed in White and the Man Dressed in Black, in a woman's mourning suit, are talking in an unarticulated language, a sort of *gamelot* that assembles both fragments of words and sounds deprived of meaning, until the dialogue finally explodes in the desperate cry "bisogna ridere" (we must laugh). Corra and Settimelli's *Grey + Red + Violet + Orange* stages the most ordinary and naturalistic scene (a patient with a broken arm being