LAUGHTER AND THE MANIFESTO: ALDO PALAZZESCHI'S COUNTER-FUTURIST FUTURIST *IL CONTRODOLORE*

CRISTINA CARACCHINI

Abstract: Literary history made a Futurist out of Palazzeschi, and he himself said about his manifesto, *Il controdolore* (published in *Lacerba* in 1914) that it represented his “modest and direct” contribution to Marinetti’s movement. This article situates *Il controdolore* among other mainly contemporary texts devoted to laughter. Referring to theories of manifestos, it looks at Palazzeschi’s text as a theatrical space, underlining its literary and non-pragmatic nature. I intend to show that, in this iconic work, we start to recognize certain recurring features and ideas that position Palazzeschi’s very anomalous avant-garde experience among the ranks of the Futurists, in a space of autonomous opposition to both poles of the binary Futurism/non-Futurism. As a matter of fact, his position, liminal, and somewhat anarchic, makes his work a convincing antecedent of avant-garde movements to come, especially Dadaism.

In the realm of politics, opposing one power most often translates to abiding by another. Literary history made a Futurist out of Palazzeschi, and he himself said about his manifesto *Il controdolore* that it represented his “modest and direct” (*Scherzi di gioventù* 6) contribution to Marinetti’s movement.¹ The manifesto appeared in the second 1914 issue of *Lacerba*, a Futurist journal published and edited by Ardengo Soffici and Giovanni Papini out of Florence. It was one of only two of Palazzeschi’s contributions to that journal in 1914, and we may read it as the response of an anti-interventionist to the extremist and war-mongering positions of the other members of the movement. I intend to show that, starting with this iconic work, we can recognize certain recurring features and ideas that situate Aldo Palazzeschi’s very anomalous avant-garde experience among the ranks of the Futurists, in a space of autonomous opposition to both poles of the binary Futurism/non-Futurism, a space worth problematizing. Non-Futurism, in

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

Marinetti's terms, amounted to "*passéism*" and as such encompassed everything the avant-garde movement intended to supplant, i.e., the institutionalized and consecrated literary and, more generally, artistic instances of culture, with their ethical implications and social relevance. With a metaphor appropriate to the function that the manifesto, as a genre, has in the political scene, we may say that with his work, in particular with *Il controdolore*, Palazzeschi shares in the Futurist literary "upheavals," though he does not join in their actual attempts at a "*prise de pouvoir*," nor does he share in the forms through which those attempts were carried out. As a matter of fact, his liminal and somehow anarchic position in relation to the two opposing poles makes his work a convincing antecedent to avant-garde movements to come, especially Dadaism.

Palazzeschi had first called his manifesto *L'antidolore*, but Marinetti suggested changing it to *Il controdolore*, which, he reasoned, had the advantage of presenting a more aggressive and less *passéist* facade. Only in 1956, with his Futurist years far behind him, did Palazzeschi reclaim the manifesto and republish it as part of his *Scherzi di gioventù* (Amusements of Youth)—this, too, a most eloquent title—with the name that he had first imagined, *L'antidolore*, along with a normalized typographical aspect. Only a few modifications to the original text were needed, at that point, to eliminate from the revised edition that peculiar, and by then unwelcome, Futurist flavour.

In the transition from *Il controdolore* to the 1956 *L'antidolore*, any of the already-rare statements that openly recalled the first manifesto of Futurism were actively cancelled, starting with "We Futurists," the plural designator of the message issuer, i.e., of the oppositional group that was aiming to occupy a hegemonic position of cultural power. The most significant change was by far the removal of what we may call the "endecatalogue," a device that constitutes, in Futurist fashion, the "expositive-verdictive" (Austin 162) part of the text. Thanks to its elimination, references to race and nationalism also disappeared, together with anti-*passéist* stances expressing the will to "cure the Latin races, especially our own, of conscious Pain, *passéist* syphilis, worsened by chronic Romanticism [...] which depresses every Italian" (*Il controdolore* 1230). A further change resulted in significant attenuation of the aggressive attitude through which Palazzeschi's program was transmitted, as in the first point of the endecatalogue that read: "To this end we wish to systematically: [...] **Destroy the ghost** of Romanticism which is haunting and painful to the things that are said to be **serious**" (1231). Along with antagonism, the "activism" conveyed by these verbal metaphors, in typical

avant-garde fashion (Poggioli 27–30), was also removed, as in point 4 of the original manifesto, which asserted Palazzeschi's determination "not to halt in the darkness of pain, but to cross it with a leap, entering into the light of a sudden laughter" (1230–31).

With such modifications, without renouncing his own subversiveness, Palazzeschi arguably intended to increase the distance between the new *L'antidolore* and the rhetoric and political stances that had characterized Futurism. I am quoting them here because we can turn the argument upside down and think of them as the most Marinettian traits of *Il controdolore*, traits that appear to be a red thread connecting all of the Futurist manifestos and that constitute a proper terminological and figurative idiolect. Besides those quoted above, such traits were scarce in the original *Il controdolore*, where they mainly had a rhetorical function, deprived of supporting thematic substance. More generally, the "delirious-volitive doing" and the "delirious-injunctive doing" that, according to Krysinski (85), characterized Marinetti's first manifesto are replaced in *Il controdolore* by a milder "doing." Adding to Krysinski's seminal typology, we may define it as "predictive-exhortative" and highlight its pervasiveness in the text. A first example of this manipulation of the idiolect and of the systematic shift towards a "predictive-exhortative doing" can be seen in the treatment undergone by the grammatical future tenses that characterized Marinetti's 1911 manifesto, which were also adopted by Palazzeschi in *Il controdolore* to inform the project of an improbable, hyperbolic cultural regeneration. According to this project, which was meant to begin with elementary school curriculum, children would be taught to "laugh sincerely at all of the things that now are considered 'serious.'" Their teachers, in turn, would have to possess "the practical intelligence" of young minds. Palazzeschi writes:

The hydropic woman will give three enormous breaths and will fall dead in her armchair. The long and thin woman, with the neck of a giraffe, will die bounding like a grasshopper, and will fall against the wall with her legs upwards, after having run about her classroom in every direction [...]. False funerals will take place in schoolyards [...]. The corpse will be made of short pastry for the older kids, and of chocolate for the younger ones [...].

The deaths of your loved ones, all of their misfortunes, will provide for you the moments of your most intense joy. (1227–8)

Such ludic desecration of any institutional figures, and their consequent loss of agency, stands out against the authoritative injunctiveness of the first manifesto of Futurism.

A second illustration of Palazzeschi's ability to adopt and simultaneously deprive Futurist prose of its substance is to be found in the Marinetti-like assertiveness of *Il controdolore*. Right from the opening statement, which sets the palingenetic dimensions of Palazzeschi's program by redefining the very foundation of the world's creation and the nature of its Creator, it is clear that the claims presented are fanciful speculations. The assertiveness of these speculations, unsupported by a grounded ideological position, is depleted of any generally imposable validity. "[I]f I suppose that God is a man, I do not consider him to be either greater or smaller than me," Palazzeschi states. He then adds:

He is a little fellow, always of medium stature, always in his middle age, always of medium proportions, who astonishes me for one reason only: that, while I consider him hesitantly and with fear, he watches me, bursting with laughter. [...] He has created in order to entertain himself. [...] How could you think that he would have created if creation had been a tedious thing? [...] Banish, therefore, all of your seriousness if you want to understand something of him and his creation. [...] The sun, for example, is his favourite toy for long, interminable games of soccer; the moon his comic looking-glass [...]. Our Earth therefore is nothing more than one of his many playthings. (1221)

It is worth noting that while on the one hand, as we said, properly Marinettian traits are infrequent in Palazzeschi's original text, and they are generally profoundly altered, on the other, intertextual references are numerous and go well beyond avant-garde texts—more so than most, if not all, of the other Futurist manifestos. Such simultaneous scarcity and abundance is a distinguishing feature of *Il controdolore*, with abundance being the most distinctive and least expected.

In an important issue that the journal *Littérature* devoted in 1980 to the genre "Manifesto," Abastado defines such texts as "the semiotic space [lieu] in which one can read the pragmatics of a society" (Abastado 5), exposing and illustrating the relationship of continuity between manifestos and their "horizon of expectation," that is, between manifestos and the system of cultural references which permits the

composition of a certain work and then allows for its reception according to different degrees of appreciation. For Abastado, in fact, the manifesto “never completely breaks away from its cultural environment; at the same time, it distances itself from it” (8). A few years later, Demers and McMurray reversed Abastado’s formulation. Giving the manifesto the status of a *genre*, they described it as “the pragmatic space in which the semiotics of a society can be read” (68) specifying that it releases its complete meaning only when considered in its dialectical relation to the “institutions.” This follows from a renewed definition of the manifesto:

A manifesto is any shocking intervention, written and/or acted out by one or some of minority issuers to a majority, be it either real or imagined, through which he/they aim to force the support of some aesthetic, ethical or political project that, in a dialectic of power of strong centre/periphery—periphery/strong center, validates or invalidates the institution. (Demers and McMurray 68)

Distinguishing between manifestos of “imposition” and of “opposition,” Demers and McMurray explain that only the second kind can be found in literature since there is no possible coincidence between political power and any artistic power that wishes to be socially innovative (56). This second kind includes “foundational” manifestos, manifestos of “maintenance,” and manifestos of “self-dissolution,” each being the expression of a different phase reached by the issuing movement in its affirmation, growth, and dissolution. The manifestos of “maintenance” are characterized by an intertextuality defined as “internal,” i.e., internal to the specific ensemble of partisan texts of which the manifesto is part. This is the nature and weakness of the manifesto: indeed, once the initial “punch-effect” diminishes, the institution is able to assimilate it and the movement that issued it, causing them to become a part of a tradition of like expressions.

Il controdolore would belong to this third class, firstly, because of its date of publication, three years after Marinetti’s “Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism”; secondly, because it was *meant* to be a Futurist manifesto; and lastly, because of its textual relationship—although far from overwhelming—to Marinetti’s manifesto. What is interesting here, however, is that the salient feature of *Il controdolore* is not the “internal intertextuality” that reaches out to its own community (the avant-gardes) but, instead, the intertextual relationships that connect it to a more general “cultural environment,” contemporary as well as past. Such relationships have

been highlighted by scholarly work that sees in this manifesto the convergence of an important philosophical and literary tradition. For my part, I intend to show how this contributes to differentiating *Il controdolore*, together with a great portion of Palazzeschi's literary work, from the paths undertaken by the Italian avant-garde, starting with the way in which Palazzeschi used this intertextuality constructively, as opposed to the "*dismantling*" attitude towards previous literary experiences emblematically prompted by the first of the Futurist manifestos. Palazzeschi did not indiscriminately burn down the libraries, nor did he flood the museums, as was, although metaphorically, suggested by Marinetti. Rather, he chose a particular part of the European cultural capital, past as well as present, namely that of the reflection on the comic, and kept working at it, maintaining an almost "respectful" continuity to the original artistic operation, though playfully rather than seriously, and reshaping the traditional culture that Marinetti's Futurism sought to efface. It is in such a way that *Il controdolore* creates its own space among specific competing literary theories, ethical visions, and aesthetics. This being said, it is necessary to nuance the landscape traced up to now. As Luca Somigli points out, Marinetti's first manifesto too "presents traces of what has been discarded" since it bears witness to the process of "confront[ing] and discard[ing] a series of options regarding the place of the intellectual in modernity" and of "forg[ing] out of these possibilities a new project" that would allow escape from Symbolist and Decadent models. "Futurism [...] aims as much at closing a certain historical period as at opening a new one," writes Somigli, "and in this fundamental instability lies its originality" (95).

The intertextuality of laughter: Leopardi, Baudelaire, Bergson and Pirandello

As pertains to *Il controdolore*'s contemporary references, it is enough to consider its relationship to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1891) and *The Gay Science* (1882). In 1978, Fausto Curi clearly illustrated the similarities between Nietzsche's idea of a time of "tragic morals" and of "religions of remorse" that always end with the "comedy of existence" and the "lordship of laughter" (Curi 205–36) and Palazzeschi's parody of the Romantics' epigonistic insistence on human tragedy, to which he opposes his institution of a religion of laughter, which worships a laughing god.

A few years later, Francesco Iengo proposed considering Palazzeschi's *Il controdolore* as the last of Leopardi's *Operette morali*, that is, as the actualization of

that project of a “history of laughter” that Leopardi had spoken of in “Elogio degli uccelli.” From Leopardi’s *Operette morali*, Palazzeschi gleans images, lexemes, and concepts that acquire a grotesque and parodic colour under his pen. What is more, he guarantees the recognition of the rapport of intertextuality by tracing, in his manifesto, the portrait of a hunchbacked poet, singer of universal sorrows (Iengo 123). The moderation of Palazzeschi’s adherence to Marinetti’s invitation to make *tabula rasa* of all that tradition, of which Leopardi is an emblematic representative, is visible in this double treatment of Leopardi, who becomes both a parodic figure, the comically sorrowful hunchbacked lyrical poet, and a literary model from whom he borrows irony and images for his manifesto. Palazzeschi selects what to salvage and what to discard, finding fertile ground for his poetics in the *Operette morali* at the expense of Leopardi’s lyrical poetry. It is enough to make of the arsonist-writer, who should have burned down the libraries, the fire fighter protecting at least part of its holdings. As such a concrete referent, Leopardi is indeed a signal of how Palazzeschi’s artistic work, if irreverent, rests on recognizable canonical bases without responding to the call for paroliberism, simultaneism, aesthetic of matter, and poetics of modernity, put forward by Marinetti in view of the creation of a new Futurist literature. Such an attitude is also visible in the absence of a response to any of the endecatalogue’s prescriptions of the foundation Manifesto, which on the contrary headed in the direction of the aesthetics of machinism, agonism, machism, and bellicism. It is a peculiar situation since Futurist manifestos, for the most part, take the endecatalogue as a matrix, adapting it to a diverse range of disciplines.

With this in mind, we must ask ourselves what quality of this manifesto endeared it to Marinetti and his Futurist friends. Certainly, as Iengo suggests, they were partial to it because of the process of reduction of the aura undergone by the great literary themes, a process that Palazzeschi implemented both at the lexical and rhetorical level (Iengo 123). Probably, the similarity between Palazzeschi’s improbable ideas of scholastic education and the pedagogical provocations that had found expression in Marinetti’s 1910 text “Contro i professori” also appealed to them (125). But it seems to me that there is more. Upon a closer reading, *Il controdolore* shows interesting and at the same time misleading similarities with the founding manifesto, and peculiarly with its conclusive section. This had already been the case with Palazzeschi’s best-known poetic collection, *L’incendiario*, a title that recalls those “gay incendiaries with charred fingers” (“Founding” 23) that Marinetti describes towards the conclusion of his manifesto, the essential

characteristic of which they embody. However, beside this commonality of images, it is the coincidence of rhetorical typology that is worth pausing on. The excess of the founding manifesto—declarations such as: “It is from Italy that we launch through the world this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours” (Marinetti, “Founding” 22)—takes on a hyperbolic semblance in programmatic as well as dismissive assertions such as: “because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, *ciceroni* and antiquarians” (22). The equivalence set in this quote presents a grotesque tone that *Il controdolore* echoes, giving it a more evident comic turn and bringing it closer to Pirandellian humour. In Marinetti, such a connotation reaches its peak in deliriously assertive passages, such as:

For too long has Italy been a dealer in second-hand clothes. We mean to free her from the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards. Museums: cemeteries! [...] Identical, surely, in the sinister promiscuity of so many bodies unknown to one another. Museums: public dormitories where one lies forever beside hated or unknown beings. Museums: absurd abattoirs of painters and sculptors ferociously slaughtering each other with colour-blows and line-blows, the length of the fought-over walls! (Marinetti, “Founding” 22)

The grotesque and hyperbolic character of these assertions becomes clearer when they are compared with earlier texts bearing a similar type of imagery but more clearly intended to formulate a theory of laughter and of the art of the caricature:

A doubt assails me. Should I reply with a formal demonstration to the kind of preliminary question which no doubt will be raised by certain spiteful pundits of solemnity—charlatans of gravity, pedantic corpses which have emerged from the icy vaults of the *Institut* and have come again to the land of the living, like a band of miserly ghosts, to snatch a few coppers from the obliging administration? (Baudelaire 148)

The correspondences of the objects and of the quality of the signs that describe them are remarkable. Interestingly this is not a quote from the French-writing Marinetti, but from Baudelaire, who, with this “sketch in ink,” extracted from his

1855 "The Essence of Laughter," paints a satirically deformed image of academic and cultural institutions.

The intolerance towards inherited rules and the authorities perpetuating them is not an invention specific to the historical avant-garde. The Romantics, from Goethe to Hugo, were masters in this matter. It is enough to remember that long before Hugo's programmatic prefaces, for Kant the genius was he who prescribed rules to art, and not the other way around. So, following this line of continuity, it is not surprising to read Palazzeschi's sarcastic mentions of the professors that are "[l]ike guards at every gate" ("So Let Me" 64), ready to censor his unorthodox and free activity, as happens in "E lasciatemi divertire" ("So Let Me Have My Fun"), where the lyrical "I" reclaims his right to have fun at least in writing poetry—fun that there, then, meant subversion.

At this point, we must situate laughter—possibly Palazzeschi's most powerful mode of opposition to power—in a broader European context in order to better locate its specificity, and this will lead us not only to Baudelaire, but also to Bergson and Pirandello. Just as it is possible to compare the founding manifesto to Baudelaire's "The Essence of Laughter," an intertextual relationship to *Il controdolore* is equally as observable. At the structural level, these essays are similar in the sense that both easily transition from comical and caricatural, to ethical and theological questions; from the description of laughter-provoking characters and events, to the description of divinity, based on its rapport with laughter. For Baudelaire, laughter is by nature diabolical; it is a fruit that follows the corruption of innocence. Indeed, "[t]he sage trembles at the thought of having laughed [...] the *Sage par excellence*, the Word Incarnate, never laughed. In the eyes of One who has all knowledge and all power, the comic does not exist" (149). Nor is Laughter joyful, as it has the dry taste that comes from the fact that one laughs at the sorrow of others. It is in fact the expression of one's superiority over the man that weeps.

[W]hat is there so delightful in the sight of a man falling on the ice or in the street, or stumbling at the end of a pavement [...] Nevertheless the laugh has gone forth, sudden and irrepressible. It is certain that if you care to explore this situation, you will find a certain unconscious pride at the core of the laughter's thought. That is the point of departure. 'Look at me! I am not falling', he seems to say. 'Look at me! I am walking upright. (Baudelaire 152)

But this sense of superiority is neither that of the pure of spirit nor of the wise man. According to Baudelaire, “[l]aughter is satanic: it is thus profoundly human,” and as such it is “contradictory; that is to say it is a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery” (154). The scrutiny of the occurrences of laughter is here associated with that of its essential nature. The sense of bitterness behind Baudelaire’s laughter (adults only laugh without reserve, like children, and without any aftertaste, when presented with a certain form of the grotesque) marks man’s sin of pride. In fact, laughter is of the man who knows, of the Christian man after he has been cast out the Garden of Eden. It is just the modern and Western man who recognizes the comical or transforms into comical what at an earlier age would have been thought of as serious. Baudelaire’s position is ambiguous in this sense: of this sin, he, the flâneur, the dandy, is not actually repentant, though he knows its sorrows. “The man who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall” (154), but as a philosopher, Baudelaire is an exception, one of those who can double themselves and who, watching themselves, can laugh at their own miseries. And he laughs. His attention is focused on the relationship that the viewer establishes with the event he witnesses (here, the fall), a relationship of superiority. Henri Bergson presents us with a very similar scene, but switches the focus to the event of the fall itself, and to its nature, which he describes as being properly comical:

A man, running along the street, stumbles and falls; the passers-by burst out laughing. They would not laugh at him, I imagine, could they suppose that the whim had suddenly seized him to sit down on the ground. They laugh because his sitting down is involuntary [...] through a lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum [...] when the circumstances of the case called for something else. That is the reason of the man’s fall, and also of the people’s laughter. (Bergson, 13–14)

According to Bergson, laughter is a “social gesture,” a gesture through which society *castigat ridendo mores*, punishes what is not malleable but fixed, still. Tension and elasticity of body and spirit are necessary for social life not to degenerate into “inertia” and “automatism.” Those bodies in which the inertia of matter has prevailed over the mobility of the soul bear traces of such victory. A soul that has grown in stiffness, in automatism, and lost its vital elasticity is

betrayed by its body's singular traits, tics, and features. So it happens that a moral issue crystalizes into a grimace that, in turn, becomes—if we may apply rhetoric categories to Bergson's description—its metonymy. These are the typical features of comedic characters and the main substance of caricatures (Bergson 19). We recognize in someone that single characteristic trait, maybe a grimace, maybe a tendency towards accidents such as falling, and therefore we laugh. It is a personal laughter, as well as a social laughter, dictated by the fact that society, thought of as a living organism, dictates that each one of its members must “be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment; in short, he must avoid shutting himself up in his own peculiar character as a philosopher in his ivory tower” (122). But in order to laugh, our feelings have to be put on hold. We cannot sympathize and at the same time find something comical. Laughter requires a “temporary anaesthesia of the heart” (11).

There is a 1912 short story, by the title of *Tu ridi*, in which Luigi Pirandello assembles a series of images that closely resemble the falls described by Baudelaire and Bergson. As in those texts, in Pirandello's we become the spectators of the pain of the *other*. A man, who has had more than his share of difficulties, wakes up every morning without ever being able to answer his wife when she asks him what he laughs about in his sleep. Made aware on a daily basis of his nightly laughter, he imagines marvellous scenarios in order to explain it. One day, he finally remembers:

There: he would see a broad flight of steps, which a certain man called Torella, one of his old office buddies, was barely managing to climb, leaning on a stick, bow-legged. Behind Torella, climbing quickly, was his boss, Cavalier Ridotti, who was entertaining himself pitilessly by hitting with his own stick that of Torella who, because of his bow-legs, needed, in climbing, to lean steadily upon his stick. At last, that poor man, Torella, who could not bear it any longer, would bend down, and [...] would begin to kick out, like a mule at Cavalier Ridotti. Ridotti [...], dogging those kicks, would try to poke the tip of his cruel stick into the exposed backside of poor Torella [...] and at the end, he would succeed. At this sight, Mr. Anselmo, waking up, with a sudden resigned smile on his lips, felt his spirit and breath drop. Oh God, was this why he laughed? (1223)

The situation, comic-grotesque in flavour, is prototypical of the most classically styled *commedia dell'arte*, its comic matter consisting of trips, beatings, and falls. Anselmo, in his role as a spectator inscribed in the dream, watches the scene and laughs at its comicality. In his essay *L'umorismo* (*On Humour*), published in 1908, Pirandello calls this first movement of the spirit the "perception of the opposite" (113), and as readers of "Tu ridi" we are forced to deal with our own "feeling of the opposite" (113). We cannot, indeed, anaesthetize our feelings (as Bergson would say), because the narration of the dream is executed in such a way as to let us recognise a struggle both of class and of civilisation, between a character defined as a "poor fellow" (1223) and a *cruel* boss brandishing an equally "cruel stick" (1223). In "Tu ridi," also, this second movement of the spirit is objectified, chronologically situated in a subsequent moment: the moment in which humour sets aside the comical and the laughter stops. As Mr. Anselmo wakes, while viewing in his mind the film of the past night's dream, suffering, rather than laughter, is his companion.

In *L'umorismo*, Pirandello sets aside comical events related to physical accidents, on which Baudelaire and Bergson focus. He chooses, instead, to describe the nature of humour through images that portray an evil that is not accidental, but bred into human existence, an evil that is man's decline and old age. The most notorious example is that of "an old lady whose hair is dyed and completely smeared with some kind of horrible ointment; [who] is all made-up in a clumsy and awkward fashion and is all dolled-up like a young girl" (*On Humor* 113). Pirandello explains that after causing a first comical reaction, the scene will necessarily bring out a "feeling of the opposite." Readers will have to look at the old lady with empathy, perhaps imagining that her caricatural aspect is the result of a poor attempt to retain the love of her younger husband (113). Thus, humour opens the way to compassion. The humourist sees the construction that each one "makes of himself through the work of illusion," and "through the ridiculousness of the discovery, he will see the serious and painful side; he will disassemble the construction, but not solely to laugh at it; and, instead of feeling disdain, he will rather, in his laughter, feel compassion" (132).

It could be said that here Pirandello adds his own definition of humour to the laughter presented by Baudelaire as an index of one's own sentiment of superiority in the presence of the event recognized as comical, and to the necessity of suspending one's sympathy in order to perceive the comical as such, as expressed by Bergson. Pirandello, for his part, reintroduces sympathy into a more complete

fruition of the comical, a sympathy that implies an understanding of the consubstantial proximity of he who looks and he who suffers.

Il controdolore, a vaccine against suffering

The diversity of these three points of view is, in a way, synthesised in Palazzeschi's *Il controdolore*. According to Walter Pedullà, Pirandello's *L'umorismo* may be regarded as another manifesto, preceding Marinetti's by a year (89). Whether we agree or not, we are nonetheless confronted with a chain of similar images and concerns that we have been developing up to this point, a chain that connects *Il controdolore*, Pirandello's essay, Baudelaire's *De l'essence du rire*, and Marinetti's first manifesto. I do not intend to approach these texts so as to reconstruct a direct influence, but instead to show how the same 'opportunities,' the same ideas, may undergo different treatments, and, therefore, can demonstrate how we may think of Palazzeschi as composing a manifesto in a very *sui generis* Futurist fashion; how a Futurist experience such as that of Palazzeschi, of which *Il controdolore* is a concrete outcome, can define its own space within a cultural environment already crowded with texts and theories that rule the horizon of expectation of any readership.

The function of *Il controdolore* is neither descriptive nor analytic. It is not an essay, but a manifesto. And, contrary to Baudelaire, Bergson, and Pirandello, Palazzeschi is not aiming to define a genre. We could think of it as the artistic, performative version of Bergson's philosophical discussion of the constant battle that life, in its "élan," its impetus, fights against any temptation to crystalize. Palazzeschi's characters are either caricatures of Bergson's crystalized "vital impetus," or else they are embodiments of such impetuses, in this partaking of the avant-garde vitalism, in a peculiar modulation that privileges mutability and diversification. In *Il controdolore*, as is typical of Futurist manifestos, we seem to face that peculiar amalgamation of the artistic and the socio-political, which ties the artist's project to concrete obligations of commitment, especially in terms of existential and social regeneration. The declared aim of Palazzeschi's manifesto is that of uprooting suffering from existence. In order to alter the mechanism that is the cause or catalyst of every form of suffering, he proposes a general re-education of which *Il controdolore* lists the main principles, and in particular that:

We must teach our children laughter, the most immoderate, the most insolent laughter, the courage to laugh out loud as soon as they feel the need, the habit of plumbing the depths of all of their ghosts, of all of the funerary and painful aspects of their infancy, the capacity to use them for their own joy. (1226)

The implicit and necessary assumption, required for the success of this program, is that the mechanism is cultural, and not a barely instinctive, innate anthropological trait. The modification of such a mechanism takes place in stages: “One cannot intimately laugh, until he has done his digging into human sorrow” (1225). But in *Il controdolore*, instead of conducting digs into human sorrow, Palazzeschi seems to propose a series of vaccine “booster shots”: doses of the grotesque that can accustom us to halt at that point which Pirandello called the “perception of the opposite.” *Il controdolore* is meant, in summary, to facilitate the enjoyment of the comic, even when faced with the incongruity of a spectacle that the “feeling of the opposite” would rather compel us to perceive as painful. In other words, Palazzeschi appears to wish to fulfil the conditions that, according to Bergson’s *Le rire*, were required for the comic to happen, trying to provide “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart” (11).

I said “booster shots” since the first dose of the vaccine is administered by the manifesto itself, which thus qualifies as a performative text. As a matter of fact, *Il controdolore* hosts a gallery of caricaturized figures and grotesque situations that must serve as “educational” instruments. Such characters would find their most natural environment in theatre and, more generally, in creative writing. I would venture to say that the latter is the true nature of *Il controdolore*. Indeed, such figures are akin to those that we encounter in Palazzeschi’s short stories and novels, as Tamburri has pertinently shown in his study of the text (37–44). Throughout the manifesto, they populate snippets of situations that the author hyperbolically urges to put into practice, to turn into reality, starting from the school, where a student should find:

One tiny school teacher, hunchbacked, stunted, and another a giant with a prepubescent face, a very thin voice, whose cries are like a filament of glass. Another teacher will hit him with a stick, or scold him with a cavernous voice, while the little hunchback will tickle him behind the knees. The various types will be put together, alternated,

made to cry, chase each other and say ouch! ouch! in every tone, and put to death. (1226)

The resemblance to the excerpt of “Tu ridi” is evident, except that here, in *Il controdolore*, the passage in question has a programmatic nature that likens it to the directive notes included in the script of a play meant to be staged. Such a nature rules out any possibility/risk of experiencing that “feeling of the opposite” mentioned by Pirandello. The comical remains, at least on paper: a man who is clubbing another must make people laugh. And on Palazzeschi’s paper, in fact, it makes us smile. Is this the result that his operation of social regeneration aims at obtaining? The following excerpt, *mutatis mutandis*, would seem to reinforce this impression:

Think of our happiness and of that of our patients, who are accustomed to seeing around them gloomy faces that reflect death, when they will see around them, in private galleries, hunchbacked, crooked, cross-eyed ladies, covered with lumps, in low-cut dresses, peeping with their spectacles; elegant young men, bald-patched, without noses, hunchbacked, one-eyed, watching them laughing out loud—how will they not feel that they are the masters of the joy that resides in the depths of their own flesh? Everything is to be hoped for from the good education of youth. Let us combat, therefore, a false and wrong education, human respect, composure, the line, beauty, youth, wealth, freedom! (Palazzeschi 1228)

Again, readers will retain a gallery of grotesque images that are projected into a context of an intertextual nature and also includes the larger body of the author’s narrative prose work. In relating this gallery of “buffi” to the figure of Pirandello’s clumsily raddled old lady, beyond the similarity constituted by the grotesque patina of the description, we recognize another operation of inversion whereby Palazzeschi substitutes for humour all the shades of laughter: first the comic, then the sarcastic, maybe even the cynical, and finally the ironic, always depriving his “buffi” of the *sympathy* that humour implies.

Just as in *De l’essence du rire* Baudelaire had based his description of laughter on an ethical judgment founded on transcendent bases (Christ never laughed, and neither does the wise man, who conforms to Christ’s example), and just as Bergson

had exposed the link that connects laughter to morality, so now Palazzeschi frames his commitment to free mankind from pain within a new religion and under a new god (although it is worth remembering that the narrative and fictional aspect is a major trait of *Il controdolore*).

This god is not the perfection of seriousness, but of merriment, and created the world “to keep nurturing his joy and offer it to his worthy creatures” (1222), who in turn offer him a curious entertainment. The description of the laughing god, taking a side in the age-old debate on whether or not Christ ever laughed, lowers such a debate down to a caricature, just as it does with Dante’s “dark forest” that becomes bush and scrubland. In fact, man too is given the opportunity to experience god’s happiness, but on the condition of being able to cross that land which is “[a] field divided by a thick patch of thorns, briers, stingers.” God, writes Palazzeschi, “has put man on one side saying to him: cross it, over there is joy, open spaces, the life of the chosen, you will live with the few brave ones who like you will cross it. You will laugh at the pain of the lazy, the fearful, the fallen, the vile, the vanquished” (1222).

In this way, in the wake of Bergson’s idea that there is no comic outside of the realm of the human (9), in *Il controdolore*, the *differentia specifica* of human nature consists in the ability to laugh. Reason loses its status to laughter as the defining element of the human species that Aristotle had said it was. The same applies to speech, to which Dante—just to provide an emblematic example—assigned a similar defining status in the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Now it is laughter that joins man to his god and distinguishes him from other living beings. The *animal rationalis* becomes *homo ridens*. From a Freudian perspective, we can qualify as intentional and radical the actions of upheaval of the son—Palazzeschi—who substitutes his law in place of the father’s, be he, symbolically, Aristotle or Dante (a trope found in so much of our traditional philosophical literature). The manifesto is extremely coherent: whoever has learned how to laugh in spite of pain will be a chosen one. He will be one of those who are like the god in that they laugh at the world, this valley of tears that they, by an act of will, transform into a place of merriment. Many do not have the courage to cross such a valley, disregarding the thorns, others remain imprisoned, but those who succeed laugh, like a god, and laugh at the less fortunate who cry out desperately (1222).

Baudelaire’s description of laughter as inherently satanic, born out of the misfortune of others, serves us as part of the horizon onto which to project and understand Palazzeschi’s metaphors; but the cynical division between winners

and losers exudes the Nietzschean spirit of the first Futurist manifesto. However, here too Palazzeschi distinguishes himself from both Baudelaire and Marinetti, in that the ability to “traverse pain” produces two contrasting outcomes. It is indeed true that one can laugh at those who are not capable of overcoming the tripwires placed by God at the centre of the “world” which, as in folk tales, is the obstacle that defines the rite of passage. It is also true that he who is able to laugh at the man who falls also manages, through his contagious laughter, to have him pick himself up and laugh in turn (1232). Such an act, though, is not to be read as charitable. At best, as Bodei explains, commenting on the figure of the Epicurean adept traced in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Naturae*: “His dominion over the storms and shipwrecks of the world” rely on the “strength of his soul” that in turn “depends on the theory, which is, according to its etymology, the habit to contemplate a spectacle: the daily spectacle of life and death that nature stages” (Bodei 8). The Epicurean laughs at those who run after worldly goods because he sees them as “ridicula haec ludibriaque” (book 2, 47). For his part, Palazzeschi, closely following Baudelaire’s poem “A une charogne,” where the lyric I, at the sight of a corpse, reminds his young lover of what she will become, writes:

Do not stop to any degree of the deformed or the old [...] You will have more pleasure in seeing three running corpses, rest assured, than three magnificent thoroughbreds. The thoroughbred has in it the corpse that it will be; search it, discover it, do not linger on its lines of ephemeral splendour (Palazzeschi 1229–30).

In *Il controdolore*, however, *ataraxia*, the detachment from the passions of the world, *aponia*, the absence of pain, as well as the acceptance of that which alters the canons of health and beauty, is translated into vigorous laughter. And, indeed, Palazzeschi is not Lucretius, whose *De rerum natura* was intended to spread the Epicurean philosophy. *Il controdolore*, which describes the basic principles of the new cult of the “laughing god” and provides the reader with a table of commandments, has the appearance of the “sacred” text of a new religion. Or rather, we should say that it contains the parody of a religion, given its totally unrealistic and impractical principles. The parodic tone is patent in the “transcendent” principle on which *Il controdolore* is based: an average, little man with a “small, round face, who divinely laughs, as if inflamed by an infinite and eternal laughter”, and whose “little belly quivers, quivers in that joy” (1221–2).

The manifesto as a theatrical vs. transitive space

If it is true, as Kristeva maintained, that “Every text is constructed as a mosaic of citations, every text is an absorption and transformation of another text” (85), then in *Il controdolore* we should recognize a high dose of transtextuality, of a planned or unplanned relationship between texts which, according to Genette, constitutes the universal aspect of literariness (2). Palazzeschi’s manifesto dwells, as we have seen, in a very literary space and takes a mainly narrative form. Its *zeitgeist* is embodied in characters and is then translated into incitement for concrete action that, in theory, should radiate towards the exterior of his text. Such an “overflow” is part of the nature of the manifesto, which is, by definition, the place where “creeds” are affirmed that have to find their actuation in certain artistic, political, and social practices. A manifesto is a transitive space, from the margins of which matter slides into the world that constitutes its co-text and context. In the case of Futurist manifestos, through this “sliding,” literary attitudes are generally transposed into worldly activities and vice versa. An infusion/confusion of art and life therefore occurs in which neither “making life into an artwork” nor “making art into one’s life” is at stake, but instead a high degree of congruence between aesthetics, poetics, and ideology, and, eventually, their practical actualization. Both aesthetics and poetics depend, in fact, upon an ideological position. After Baudelaire, and differently from him, the Futurists, and Marinetti in particular, worked at facilitating the entrance of modernity, and the newness it comports, into the artistic space. To this end, the aesthetic of the text had to conform to the new reality. In 1913, the manifesto “Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without Strings—Words-in-Freedom” (Marinetti 95–106) fixed the bridgeheads of the new literary aesthetics marked by dynamism, simultaneity, surprise, and by the importance given to the materiality of the expressive means. The visual poetry of the *tavole parolibere* is certainly Futurism’s most innovative outcome in relation to a canonical literary genre, but the space of choice for its attempt at a cultural revolution was the manifesto itself. Regarding this, Hjartarson’s thesis is that by transforming the historical event traditionally declared in the political manifesto into a poetic event, the historical avant-garde consecrates language as the “driving force of history,” thus making revolutionary action inseparable from linguistic performance. The manifesto, therefore, is simultaneously the declaration and the execution of its own revolutionary action (179).

To go hand in hand with the turmoil that invested the form, Futurist poetics will have to sing a new sublime. Marinetti wants it to be the “electric moons” and “great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot” (22), concrete crowds, as concrete as trains and factories; or war, which on paper occupies the same space as hyperboles such as the invitations to burn down libraries and flood museums. Such poetics acquires a more concrete definition once translated into socio-political positions, as for the notorious intent to glorify “militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman” (22).

Within the Futurist environment, the creative act accomplished by the poet, an act of a literary nature, is permeated by his activism; that is, by a characteristic attitude not of the intellectual, but of the Futurist person. According to the manifesto, “The poet must spend himself with ardour, splendour, and generosity, to swell the enthusiastic fervour of the primordial elements” (21). Assertions such as “[e]xcept in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece” (21), while expressing the aesthetic instructions to follow in order for the new poetics to see the light, echo the activism required from the individual. Such a conjuncture of themes, forms, and ethos is at the basis of multiple examples of that which Hjartarson, borrowing from Benjamin, calls an “aestheticized conception of politics and a politicized conception of art” (194). The “delirious-volitive doing,” planning-bound, melts with the “delirious-assertive doing” to ideologically interpret and pragmatically confront art as well as the world.

With Martin Puchner, we can think of the manifesto genre as a theatrical and performative space. It is theatrical in as much as, like theatre, it is an “unauthorized and unauthorizing context” for the “speech act”, as defined by Austin, to happen (Puchner 25). It is performative because manifestos aim to do things with words, “to change the world” (5). “The battle between theatricality and performativity” (25) is at the core of the genre since manifestos seek to be read as giving voice to an authority that they will eventually—if successful—acquire. This is especially true for Futurist manifestos, the means by which the group intended to gain the right and ability to bring about the “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe” (as per the title of a 1915 text by Balla and Depero). They had planned to achieve it by acting upon each individual art, as well as by shaping an ideology that would eventually lead to political activism. Among these many links that go

towards forming a solid Futurist “chain,” Palazzeschi’s contribution, is a rather heterogeneous one. But what are the strengths and the weakness of his link?

Il controdolore speaks of the world’s sorrow and of how laughter can alleviate it. It speaks through a framework of ideas that are philosophical and literary in their provenance. So much so that, when reading, we actuate, as we just did, a vast network of intertextual relations that connect it to, among others, Baudelaire, Bergson, and Pirandello. But the most relevant texts are essays, and they are meant to formulate a description of genres and typologies—caricature, comic, and humour—in the broader isotopy of laughter. As for Palazzeschi, his is a manifesto.

Il controdolore is conceived as a performative text, in the sense that it does what it talks about. It is in fact a comical space, a little textual theatre, where all the conventions that regulate social life, and the scale of values onto which they are based, are turned upside down. In this theatre, through incongruous settings, Palazzeschi stages stunted, grotesque, and improbable characters, protagonists of visibly inappropriate events. His reader smiles and remains puzzled. Characters and situations are indeed the only answer to the invitation on which the entirety of the manifesto is based: the invitation to laugh at, and about, pain, and about the axiological vision on life that allows it to exist. In *Il controdolore*, man, in his mortal journeys, finds his only rescue in laughter. In this sense, *Il controdolore* is a self-referential narrative. None of the concrete suggestions it contains can be transposed onto the everyday life of the reader. Poggioni’s category of nihilism, seen as structural part of the definition of the avant-garde (61–65), is here extremely pertinent. It is enough to think about its parody of a religion, the principles of which are definitely impracticable.

It is commonly agreed that Futurism’s best fruits are its manifestos. Palazzeschi wrote a comical one, rich in theatrical sketches instead of injunctions that spill from the text into the world. Barilli indicated that the Futurist grotesque is marked by three movements, the last of which is *Il controdolore*, while the first and second one are, respectively, the 1910 *L’incendiario* and Marinetti’s 1913 manifesto *Il Teatro di Varietà*. This latest reference deserves to be developed because of its remarkable similarities to *Il controdolore*. Marinetti describes Variety Theatre as “the synthesis of everything that humanity has up to now refined in its nerves to divert itself by laughing at material and moral grief; it is also the bubbling fusion of all the laughter, all the smiles, all the mocking grins, all the contortions and grimaces of future humanity” (Marinetti 126–31).

The grotesque that he delineates has its origin in the destruction of the “Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious,” just like Palazzeschi’s grotesque, but Marinetti’s is realized by performing artists in a physical space, the stage. The manifesto, that is, delegates its mission to an external agent, namely theatre, although mirroring in its style the liveliness of the object that it promotes. *Il controdolore*, instead, is to be understood as an actual theatrical space.

In synthesis, while Marinetti’s founding manifesto blurred the limits between the literary deliberations of its author and his intention of participating in the country’s social and political modernity, Palazzeschi’s is a parody of the Futurist manifesto’s *sub-genre* itself. In fact, the manifesto as a genre, initially used by the Futurists as a means of spreading their own artistic-ideological positions, morphs, with *Il controdolore*, into a “religious” text and a space of resistance to the agonism and activism of the avant-garde and its superhomistic (impracticable) commandments. If we think of the opening of the founding manifesto, “We stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits” (Marinetti, “Founding” 19), it is clear that Palazzeschi’s text can be read as a parody of the messianic tone common to all Futurist manifestos, as well as a parody of their injunctive character, considering that in *Il controdolore*, both the messianic tone and the injunctive character are applied to deliberately unworthy objects. Once the deliro-grotesque apparatus that supported the programmatic nature of Futurism becomes hypertrophic—as happens in *Il controdolore*—it explodes the relation that likens the manifesto to *a lieu* in which a vision or an idea designed to be put into practice is promoted, and then the manifesto itself, as a genre, while retaining its ethical significance, is radically emptied of its extra-artistic pragmatic function.

Il controdolore is a manifesto that closes in on itself and, in so doing, it undermined the genre from within, as it had been developed by the futurists. From today’s point of view, though, rather than undermining it, Palazzeschi radically altered it. In 1918, Tzara would take over, parodying the genre in the most famous of Dada’s manifestos: “I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestos, as I am also against principles [...] I write this manifesto to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air” (Tzara 36).

Calinescu explains the difference between modernism and avant-garde by positing the second as a “self-conscious parody” of the first and affirms that parody implies a certain admiration for the subject parodied. Successful parodies are those

that appear to be critical but at some level could also “be mistaken for the original itself” (Calinescu 141). Might we think of applying this notion of parody to *Il controdolore*? And so, if Baudelaire laughs, Palazzeschi, in 1914, plays while writing. He plays at being a Futurist, and therefore at being among those who are attempting to move from the periphery to the center of the system of cultural power, from a marginal to a hegemonic position. And with his playing, he opens the way for Dada, the most intransitive and ontologically original of the avant-garde movements. Their work shares an uncanny laughter that fits into neither Bergson’s nor Pirandello’s definitions, and it is in this sense that Palazzeschi passes the baton on to the next generation of the avant-garde. He had said it already in 1910: “Let me have my fun!” (133).

He might still have been laughing in January 1914, when he published *Il controdolore* in *Lacerba*, using the freedom that the label “Futurist” could provide him. Certainly, by the end of that year, the situation had changed and he could no longer come to terms with the “aestheticization of politics and politicization of aesthetics” that characterized Marinetti’s guidance. In October 1913, *Lacerba* had published Marinetti’s “Programma politico futurista.” In April 1914, on the pages of the magazine *La voce*, Palazzeschi prohibited Marinetti from using his name in connection with the Futurist movement. In early 1915, together with the directors of the Florentine *Lacerba*, Papini and Soffici, he penned a piece entitled “Futurismo e Marinettismo” meant to distinguish between the Milanese and the Florentine branches of Futurism. At the end of the previous year, again in *Lacerba*, Palazzeschi made his isolated and unequivocal declaration of neutrality by publishing “Neutrale,” his only piece in that journal in 1914 besides, emblematically, *Il controdolore*.

The saltimbanco-arsonist-man of smoke came out of the war personally defeated: “The powerful weapon that destiny had put into my hand, in order to balance my life, had fallen. The ability to laugh always, at any time, about the other, and more than the one laughing at me, and finally, to be able to laugh at myself” (*Due imperi* 79).

University of Western Ontario

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