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Life as Art, Art as Life, and Life's Art: the 'Living Poetics' of Italian Modernism

DOI 10.1515/arcadia-2016-0004

Abstract: This article studies the key concept of 'life' within the context of Italian modernism, understood in the broad sense of a network of cultural responses in the period from 1861 until the mid-1930s. Following Roberto Esposito's suggestion that the transversal category of life is distinctive for Italian "living thought" (Esposito), the 'living poetics' here exposed focuses on three key literary moments in which the crucial relationship between life and art is radically redefined. D'Annunzio's 'life as art' aesthetics develops a 'lifestyle' with an individualist as well as nationalist dimension with its climax in the First World War. Futurism, starting from the axiom that war is the sole hygiene of the world, develops instead an 'art as life program' with which to revolutionize not only present life but also the afterlife. Finally, the young realists of the 1930s bring back absolutist notions of life to their realist and private proportions in order to create a poetics of reconstruction after the trauma of the Great War. A comparison between these literary moments shows how the concept of life not only is a constitutive element of an Italian 'living poetics,' but also that literary change entails a constant redefinition of autonomist and heteronomous aspects of the paradoxical tension between art and life.

Keywords: life, modernism, D'Annunzio, Futurism, realism, Decadentism

According to Roberto Esposito's *Pensiero vivente* (Living Thought), Italy's philosophical tradition stands out internationally in the way it reflects on the concept of life. In Italian thought, he claims:

[L]ife has never been understood as an undifferentiated and independent mode of a biological or metaphysical type [...] because the entirety of Italian thought is traversed and

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determined by it. And also, because life has been always thought about both in relation to and in confrontation with the categories of history and politics. This means that life is not an alternative to subjectivity, but rather, constitutive of subjectivity. (Esposito 31)

This could especially be true for Italian modernism, set in the time frame of the late 19th and early 20th century, when the combination of Friedrich Nietzsche's and Henri Bergson's theories, and the political sphere of Georges Sorel's writings and theses, created a theoretical predominance of vitalism that opened the new millennium as the "vital century" (Badiou 14). An example of this vitalism being a constitutive part of modernist subjectivity is Futurism's conception of life as immanence. According to Walter Adamson, Bergson's notion of intuition "points us to a 'self' that knows in time as lived duration, that lives, as it were, internal to the world. When this self intuitively, it literally enters into the object" (304).

Italian modernism can best be understood in a broad sense, bringing together literary experiences traditionally kept separate in Italian criticism. Modernism can be considered as "the network of cultural responses," which comprises the features of modernity in Italy between 1861 and the mid-1930s, when Fascist cultural protectionism separated Italian modernism from its European context (Somigli and Moroni 12–13). Therefore, Italian modernism is intrinsically contradictory and can best be used as "an 'open' or 'weak' epistemological category to access the constellation of cultural phenomena which reflect, in complex and contradictory ways, on the experience of modernity in Italy" (4).

This contradictory literary reflection on modernity has also been explained in terms of the juxtaposition in Italian modernism of realism and modernism. Rather than constituting a *contradictio in terminis*, some Italian scholars have theorized a modernist category or attitude that combines a historiographic with a metahistorical critical dimension (Luperini 11; Donnarumma 16). To indicate the common project to turn the modernist novel into the representation of the conflicts of modernity, of the new relationship between the self and the world, and of the anxieties of the present, Riccardo Castellana coined and theorized the binomial "realismo modernista," used as a critical category, in a rather restricted time span (Castellana 33). A more looser interpretation of the chronological limits of this "modernist realism" could span from 1904 (the publication of Luigi Pirandello's *Mattia Pascal*) until 1929 with the Great Depression and the publication of Alberto Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* (Times of Indifference), but its metahistorical undercurrent of conscious realism should be considered in continuity with 19th century realism and, although flexible in time, it is intrinsically characterized by its refusal of autoreferentiality and its critical function (Baldi 82). This view of an extended Italian modernism with an accent on realism, allows to include also the generation of the 1930s that emerged with a new sort of prose fiction after the

traditionally called ‘high modernist’ *momentum* with which it has many aspects in common.

Such an integrative view of Italian modernism is not generally accepted in the Italian critical debate if this means the inclusion of Decadentism (Luperini) and avant-gardism (Donnarumma). However, in order to analyse the key concept of life as a transversal category and as being at the same time specific of Italian thought and related to its European context, the concept of modernism as a network allows us to focus on the interrelatedness of three particular moments in the articulation of the fundamental relationship between art and life and to construct, as it where, a ‘living poetics’ of Italian modernism.

First of all, life in what traditionally is considered Decadentism is associated with the personality of Gabriele D’Annunzio, who tries to turn his life into a work of art. D’Annunzio’s lifestyle was both the object of widespread imitation as well as of strong rejection, as opposed to Luigi Pirandello’s famous formulation of the insoluble opposition between life and art. Second, life according to the Futurist avant-garde as formulated by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was an essential element for the creation of a new form of art with a social, political, as well as moral-spiritual dimension, associated with revolutionary claims that exceeded the aesthetic sphere. In opposition to these two tendencies, the former being rather egocentric and the latter being more programmatic, the young prose writers of the 1930s conceived life after the so-called ‘return to order’ and during the consolidation of Fascism, in a non-aesthetic and a non-revolutionary way. The inclination to combine art and life in their writings originated in the first place from the will to renovate and reconstruct a subjectivity rooted in the national values and the materiality of everyday life.

At first sight, these three viewpoints, related to different moments in literary history, may appear to be closely linked to each other, in that they share the obsession with interconnectedness of literature and life, but this interconnectedness is conceived of in highly different ways that could be synthesized with the conflict between autonomist and heteronomist function of the poetics (MDRN). A key moment therefore, in these three discrete moments, is the historical event of the First World War, which has been given different interpretations. For D’Annunzio it is a test case for his personal equation between life and art, as the image of the war materialized in his personal interpretation of the *Übermensch*. For the Futurists war is not so much a personal but rather an issue of poetics, as it is considered to be the only hygiene of the world and incarnates the destructive force necessary to realize a radical renewal. Instead, for the young writers around 1930 the experience of the Great War already belongs to the past, and their focus is mainly on the reconstruction of modern society. Hence, life is seen as an ethical value situated in the present and projected in the future.

1 The Concept of Life According to Gabriele D'Annunzio

1.1 A Dandyish maître à penser

The concept of life in Gabriele D'Annunzio's life and work is a very complex one, since the key term 'life' is a *fil rouge* of the author's entire bio-bibliography, alongside aestheticism in its various aspects. Aestheticism (from the greek work 'aisthetikòs,' 'related to sensations') in D'Annunzio is a result of the spiritual sublimation of the physical perception of life. Defined by Benedetto Croce as a "dilettante di sensazioni" ("amateur of sensations," 868),¹ D'Annunzio did everything in his power to make this definition correctly understood: He was not only a mere interpreter of things for which he did not understand, for he was also the creator of an existence that he truly loved to impart upon his followers so as to make them believe and imitate him.

By the time the first great modern brand was registered (Coca-Cola in 1893), D'Annunzio was himself already a brand and his tumultuous existence a trademark of it: Inventor of the so called 'inimitable living' lifestyle ('dannunzianesimo' or the 'vivere inimitabile') which shaped the behavior of the Italian bourgeoisie for almost nearly half a century through literature, politics, product branding, fashion, and so forth.

D'Annunzio, basically an aesthete, aspired to turn his life into a work of art with his entire poetics to be seen as a series of attempts to entangle his glamorous existence with his prose and poetry. The latter, due to its enormous popularity, ended up becoming a sort of ideological handbook for the bourgeoisie of the newborn Italian state in need of charismatic guidance looking to establish cultural and social values. According to the dominant perception in Italian public opinion of the 1880s and 1890s, Italy was an unfinished political process with obvious identity issues centered on the incipient clash between the North and the South. In his articles published in Roman newspapers (*Tribuna*, *Cronaca Bizantina*, *Capitan Fracassa*, *Fanfulla della Domenica*) D'Annunzio wrote, hidden behind a multitude of pseudonyms (Happemouche, Vere de Vere, Il Duca Minimo, Lila Biscuit, etc.), about the Roman high society as if he were a Parisian bringing the whiff of the "ville lumière" to the still partially unpaved streets of the "città eternal." Already in this early phase, D'Annunzio started to build up his person-

1 All translations are by the authors if not specified otherwise.

ality which is “diffracté [en plusieurs personnages], usant de contrepersonnages, de doubles, d’opposants, etc.” (Meizoz 28).

His works told Italians how to live, his articles told them even how to dress or, with the help of *bon ton* tips, how to behave. Thanks to the shrewd usage of the developing Italian mass media system, D’Annunzio made sure his detractors would never be able to outnumber his followers whether they were young intellectuals in search for a new, apparently iconoclastic, role model² or just middle class men with a strong desire to see their egos socially recognized.

Within D’Annunzio’s aestheticism, ‘beauty’ and ‘art’ are primarily identified in terms of sensory experiences provoked by artifacts and settings. Therefore, the external appearance of reality becomes of utmost importance, the supreme and only authentic value within the entire experience of life. According to D’Annunzio, everyday life was meant to be exclusively beautiful in its sensory appearance. The sole experience necessary for a fulfilled existence is that of ‘beauty’ which also provided the foundation of D’Annunzio’s political views, in particular of his antidemocratic and elitist contempt of a society becoming increasingly vulgar because of an ever expanding mercantilism, the increasing political power of the masses and the compromises of parliamentary democracy. The disdainful poet therefore takes refuge in his solitary dream of ‘beauty,’ and the only way out of the vulgarity of the present time is the transformation of every experience into an aesthetic experience, making one’s own life subordinate to Art. As a consequence, Art becomes the only real source of life, and the artifacts able to inspire aesthetic experiences, how unimportant they may seem, become crucial for the meaning of life: D’Annunzio defines himself as an “animale di lusso” (‘animal of luxury’) in the constant grip of a “bisogno del superfluo” (‘need for the superfluous’)³ that can be encountered in his fictional pseudo-Nietzschean vitalistic alter egos Andrea Sperelli, Giorgio Aurispa and Claudio Cantelmo.

1.2 Life as a Work of Art vs. Life or the Work of Art

D’Annunzio’s first collection of short stories, *Terra vergine* (The Virgin Country, 1884), as well as the following ones, are written under the influence of Verga’s ‘verismo,’ characterized by the violent Darwinist idea of the human existence as a

² Among them we find important names of modern Italian literature in their early years such as Gadda, Malaparte, Moravia, Montale with Pasolini harshly critical yet fascinated by the Vate’s literary power.

³ “Io sono un animale di lusso; e il superfluo m’è necessario come il respirare.” (D’Annunzio, *Lettere ai Treves* 186)

struggle of life. The young writer's artistry, though, and the utmost bent for 'prose recherchée' (enriched with samples of Abruzzese dialect) end up losing the deep implications of Verga's theories and give to D'Annunzio's realism a slightly epidermal dimension. In some episodes the cruelty towards the destiny of the characters, all set in D'Annunzio's native region (Abruzzo), fictionalized to a certain degree and immersed in the local folklore, comes close to the grotesque.

'Verismo' was just a temporary mask worn by the young poet. During this time D'Annunzio was a well-known literary personality with an exemplary biography (Meizoz 25), he allowed himself to live by (multiple) postures: His increasing success encouraged him to try other fashionable literary masks. This sometimes led to accusations of plagiarism or other *succès de scandale* that instead of damaging his reputation, increased the economic value of his work – a mechanism D'Annunzio was perfectly aware of.

For example, D'Annunzio's infatuation with inner life (as it was obsessively analyzed by Russian novelists) lead to works such as *Giovanni Episcopo* (1892), *L'innocente* (The Intruder, 1892) and *Il trionfo della morte* (The Triumph of Death, 1894) which is partially influenced by Zola's prose as well. D'Annunzio's maturation as a writer took him from the hyper-realistic prose that was devoid of empathy in his earlier sketches ('bozzetti') to the feigned predilection for introspection mixed with the remains of aestheticism in *Il trionfo della morte* in which Giorgio Aurispa and Ippolita Sanzio, incapable to live their life as they wanted to, eventually commit suicide in the tragic finale of the novel. The year after, in 1895, D'Annunzio's political views lead to the idea of life expressed by the character Claudio Cantelmo, determined to become the founder of a new, elected nation, while the idea of life as an artistic abstraction will return in the highly baroque prose of *Il fuoco* (The Flame, 1900).

While dominating the salons and the press of Rome (both as a writer and as a scandalous presence), D'Annunzio publishes his first and his most renown novel, *Il Piacere* (The Child of Pleasure, 1889) in which the dandyish count Andrea Sperelli – the main character and the literary descendant from the duke Des Esseintes from J. K. Huysmans' *À rebours* published five years earlier – declares: "You must make your own life as you would any other work of art. It is necessary for the life of a man of intellect to be his masterpiece. The true superiority is all here." (145) That was also D'Annunzio's credo, the exact opposite of Luigi Pirandello's famous statement: "Life, you either write it, or live it. I've never lived it if not by writing it." (Pirandello, *Carteggi inediti* 82) Pirandello's phrase implies a different concept of human existence and a necessary choice between life and fiction. D'Annunzio, on the other hand, identifies his life and work in the decadent equation 'life = art' and, indeed, his great fame did not come merely from his prodigious, well-regarded and extremely bankable literary output, but also from his relentless self-promotion,

strategic fictionalization and branding of his own existence. The result, the grotesque superman masque of the *poseur*, encompasses all the identities displayed by pseudonyms, letters and lifestyle. This will actually become the basis for the long-term intertextual relationship between D'Annunzio and Pirandello.

D'Annunzio started combining twisted readings of French translations of Nietzsche with general ideas widely circulating in the cultural context of the turn of the century. He developed his own theory of the *Übermensch* and his relationship with life, intended as a chaos to be modeled by the superman's demiurgic hands. This theory, nevertheless, was destined to fail, unrealistic as it was, in most of his works, although his philologically impeccable linguistic abilities guaranteed him at least a status as a literary *superuomo* (Superman).

The failure of this new pseudo-aristocratic model is, more complicated than it first appears: because of its superficial inconsistency, the subtle criticism of high society and its lifestyle may remain unnoticed at first, but his critical stance became manifest in 1910, with the publication of his last novel, *Forse che sì, forse che no* (Maybe yes, maybe no, 1910), set “tra le più moderne vicende dell'epoca” (“among the most modern events of our time,” D'Annunzio, *Lettere ai Treves* 315). It is probably the most truly insightful work by D'Annunzio, as it marks a breaking point in his poetics and the starting point of an entirely new artistic phase resulting in his so-called ‘nocturnal’ period and entirely different masterpieces such as *Notturmo* (Nocturne, 1921) or *Il libro segreto* (The Secret Book, 1935). It is not a coincidence that the hero of D'Annunzio's last novel, Paolo Tarsis, has a name with biblical reminiscences. Unlike count Sperelli, Tarsis is forced to admit, after a painful and truly ‘biblical’ conversion, that life is not a raging chaos only the elected few can dominate. Instead, society with its manifold rituals is indeed capable of controlling life to a certain extent, precisely as Pirandello argued with his renowned bipartition ‘life vs. form.’ And since D'Annunzio was at least in part to blame for the Italian upper middle class' *joie de vivre*, criticism of this attitude implied an act of self-criticism vis-à-vis his own superman theories.

Nevertheless, for material reasons, D'Annunzio continuously hobnobbed with the élite of Italian society and skillfully exploited the mass media of his day, pouring out reviews and interviews and engaging in frequent publicity stunts centered on the mythography of himself (early on in his career he famously went so far as to spread rumors of his own death).

1.3 The Repeated Final Acts of a ‘National’ Existence

Even though D'Annunzio quietly admitted through subtle suggestion that his life-changing superman mottos were a hoax, this did not stop him from persevering

and living by those predicaments himself; alas, Italy once again followed the myths that he produced.

With the same ease and with the help of other, more relevant, social factors as he had deviated the bourgeoisie towards escapist hedonism two and a half decades earlier, the aging poet managed to talk the entire nation into the Great War for which it was completely unprepared. The squeaky voice of the bard and his delusional eloquence contributed to pushing his readers into the trenches of the first global conflict. In order to do so he had to leave France. After a lustrum of debts, love affairs, and somewhat dubious literary endeavors, he sacrificed an apparently glamorous existence for the nation's sake and used his literary skills for the political cause by rewriting the mythological heritage of Ancient Rome and using it to boost the nationalist zeal of the troops.

The war, marked by D'Annunzio's numerous heroic actions and diversions, ended with the so-called 'vittoria mutilata' ('mutilated victory'). The Italians felt that the peace treaties subjugated their interests. D'Annunzio once more saw the need to intervene and to add a new chapter to the story of the already intricate relations between his life and that of his nation. His compulsive need to live not only for himself but also too for his fellow citizens, gave him strength for the Lilliputian *coup d'état* called the 'penultima ventura' ('penultimate adventure') which resulted in the nationalist-libertarian occupation of the Croatian city of Fiume (1919–1921), then known as the 'La città di vita' (City of life), in which free love, Futurism, yoga, piracy and other unmanageable lifestyle evolutions coexisted with radical nationalism. The hyper-aestheticization of political life in that period eventually was taken over and fruitfully radicalized by Fascism; D'Annunzio's political vitalism is recuperated as a 'mythology' without any political solution to the country's permanent crisis whatsoever.

After the end of the Fiume episode, D'Annunzio sought for a retreat and found it on the shores of Lake Garda. Here the caricatural vitalism of the younger years turned into the grotesque juvenilism of his older years that led him to live the isolated life of a 'living dead man'⁴ in a bizarre mausoleum-mansion called the Vittoriale, thus hiding from the visitors until his death in 1938, two years after Pirandello. His cocaine consumption, the frequent visits of local prostitutes dressed like young virgins, his meddling with the complex dynamics of the Italian political life under Mussolini's dictatorship, the presence of his lovers, apparently

4 In the excessive vitalism that permeates D'Annunzio's life and work, life is not necessarily opposed to death. As Lash remarks: "In vitalism life is not at all counterposed to death. Instead death is part of life. Our future is always inorganic matter. Death is seen as entropic, and part of a recombinant life process." He goes on stating that "[v]italism will sit well with the idea of death, the virus, etc." (327).

were not able to distract the poet from the vision of his pale face with the crooked teeth, as is perceivable in some of D'Annunzio's still unpublished letters from this period:

Dear unknown friend, friend of fortunes I love and remember. I will certainly invite you to Vittoriale, maybe tomorrow, maybe Monday. But I'm surprised you want to come close to me and see the face of the Leper Magician, devastated by passions, efforts, and years. If I were you, I would read again one of the divine Odes of the incorrupt "Halcyon."⁵

In conclusion, D'Annunzio's life⁶ and work stand out for their huge influence on collective consciousness and on Italy's national destiny. The author's contradictions were also those faced by the newly formed Italian democracy confronting the upcoming challenges of modernity and the perennial crisis of the 20th century. The idea of life in Gabriele D'Annunzio's life and work is a very complex one, since the key term 'life' is a *fil rouge* of the author's entire bio-bibliography, alongside aestheticism in its various aspects. D'Annunzio constantly stressed the importance of life as a fundamental concept. The writer from Pescara, however, in lack of philosophical coherence does not reach a theory of the idea of life. Pirandello's contradictory *umorismo*, and not D'Annunzio's life-art symbiosis, will be the deciding factor for the interpretation of the modern, relativistic self.

2 Manifestations of Futurist Life

From Marinetti's critical writings it becomes immediately clear that D'Annunzio's life-art symbiosis is no longer considered vitalist within an avant-garde poetics in which vitalism acquires new connotations. In *Enciclopedia Einaudi*'s entry "Avanguardia" (avant-garde), life figures in contrary to materialism, as art's rebellion against the prefixed social roles prescribed by capitalism (Asor Rosa 213). The same can be said of avant-garde's antagonism against tradition, which takes the form of a radically different use of the materials offered by tradition, and thus

⁵ "Cara amica ignota, ma amica delle fortune che io amo e ricordo. Certo vi annunzierò di venire al Vittoriale, forse domani, forse lunedì. Ma io mi meraviglio che voi desideriate vedere da vicino il volto del Mago lebbroso che è devastato dalle passioni, dalle fatiche e dagli anni. Se io fossi voi, rileggerei – in vece – una divina Ode di 'Alcyone,' incorruttibile." Unpublished letter dated October 2nd, 1926 signed by D'Annunzio and written to Mrs. Lilli Cabutti from Pescara to whose heirs we are grateful for the permission to publish the letter. Lady Cabutti was, as most of D'Annunzio's visitors, waiting in the hotel Roma near the Vittoriale to be received by the poet and this could take days or even weeks.

⁶ Among the many studies dedicated to D'Annunzio's existence, see at least Hughes-Hallet.

avant-garde art presents itself as an “open” category and an art form of endless experimentation (213). This openness seems at odds with the opposing tendency to organize the movement as a group or a school, which on the contrary promotes the crystallization of ideas. In avant-garde poetics, however, with its aim towards a total vision of the world, anti-materialism expresses the refusal to repeat in art a set of rules that tie human subjects to the practical and useful aspects of life. The avant-garde’s peripheral approach of reality combines a set of alternative values, such as childhood, primitivism, exoticism, absolute future, which are not yet part of the system of capitalist labour and together could give access to the experience of “real life” (217).

Life is first of all the energy that is necessary to revolutionize art and society. In his edition of Marinetti’s critical writings, Günter Berghaus states when discussing Futurist action-art: “Futurism sought to bridge the gap between art and life and to bring aesthetic innovation into the real world. Life was to be changed through art, and art was to become a form of life.” (Marinetti, *Critical Writings* xix) Thus Marinetti in 1915, in an interview with *La Diana*, says about the Futurist *serate* that they “mean precisely the violent incursion of life into art. Artists, alive at last, and no longer up in their ivory towers” (143). The “symbolist Masters” of the past had their merits but now they are detested for their nostalgia and their “passion for things eternal” (143). Marinetti’s manifesto “We Renounce Our Symbolist Masters, the Last of All Lovers of the Moonlight,” first published in French in *Le Futurisme* (1911), begins with the following invitation to proceed forward without looking back: “We have sacrificed everything for the success of this Futurist concept of life.” (43) Among the renounced fathers in Italy figures prominently Gabriele D’Annunzio, and it is against his influence that Marinetti urges to fight “at all costs” (45). The agents of Futurist renewal should be young and ruthless and therefore avant-garde art is also intrinsically linked with the concept of youth, as is put forward explicitly in the “Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism” in 1909: “The oldest among us are thirty; so we have at least ten years in which to complete our task. When we reach forty, other, younger, and more courageous men will very likely toss us into the trash can, like useless manuscripts. And that’s what we want!” (Marinetti, *Critical Writings* 15–16).

2.1 Life and Regeneration

Life, in combination with youth, stands for the fuel of Futurism, for the renewal of history, politics and art, and thus, in this vision, life is not an independent category but constitutive of Futurist subjectivity. Life, art, and aggression are intrinsically linked in the 1909 “Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism” as can be deduced

from points 3 (“We intend to glorify aggressive action, a restive wakefulness, life at the double, the slap and the punching fist,” Marinetti, *Critical Writings* 13), 7 (“Any work of art that lacks a sense of aggression can never be a masterpiece,” 14), and 9 (“We wish to glorify war – the sole cleanser of the world,” 14). Life is first of all considered in the face of death, in the trenches of the First World War. Marinetti’s idea of war as the “sole cleanser of the World” is exposed in his 1914 manifesto, “In This Futurist Year,” addressed to the “Students of Italy.” Futurism, with its “aura of an avant-garde” (231), is “the flag of youth, of strength, of originality at all costs” (232). Furthermore, Futurism “is an impassioned attempt at introducing life into art” (233). Art and life are intrinsically linked by their contingency that escapes any set of pre-established rules, be it political or aesthetic. Marinetti declares that “we, like Bergson, believe that ‘la vie déborde l’intelligence’” (233) and this means that “one cannot intuit even the immediate future other than by involving oneself *totally* in the living of one’s life” (233, cf. Adamson 304). The conclusion is that “war cannot die, for it is one of the laws of life” and that therefore “life = aggression” (235). In other words, “[t]he War will rejuvenate Italy” (237).

The glorification of the Great War reunites Marinetti and D’Annunzio as poets-combatants – D’Annunzio on June 4th, 1917 visits the wounded Marinetti in the hospital at Udine, bringing him a bouquet of red carnations (230) – but even in the Manifestoes dedicated to the war, D’Annunzio figures as a symbol of “yesterday’s classical styles of poetry” (235). From Futurism’s love of danger, together with the promotion of courage and everyday heroism springs the recognition of “the beauty of violence” put forward against tradition by young and rebellious men. In this way, politics and aesthetics work together with the same goal, to transform life into a work of art. In Marinetti’s “The Necessity and Beauty of Violence,” his 1910 speech for the Chamber of Labour at Naples reissued afterwards in different versions, he couples Futurism, youth and art in order to bring about “the necessary intervention of artists in public affairs, so as to turn government into a selfless art” (63). In the 1919 “Address to the Fascist Congress of Florence,” Marinetti promotes a “Board of Initiatives” to combat Italy’s gerontocracy on the level of government, and a “Technocratic Council,” instead of the Senate, will be “made up of very young men, men who have not yet reached thirty” (332). Moreover, the “proletariat of young Italians,” assembled by the Futurist movement, will at last “illuminate the world with Italian brilliance,” the vital forces of which are “creative genius, artistic flexibility, a talent for concentrating on the practical and essential aspects of life, speed of improvisation, and flashes of enthusiasm” (337), in short those talents that brought about the victory on the Piave and that of Vittorio Veneto.

The emphasis on creativity is reiterated in “Beyond Communism,” the essay Marinetti wrote in 1919 during the 21 days of his incarceration in the San Vittore

Prison in Milan. The “Life as celebration” that figures in the subtitle, starts from the premise that “[w]e Futurists have abolished all ideologies and instead introduced everywhere our own new concept of life, our formulas for spiritual health, our social and aesthetic impetus, the true expression of our temperaments as creative, revolutionary Italians” (339). This new concept of life coincides with the assumption that life “is an art form” (341), and it also contains the essence of Futurist redemption: “Thanks to us, a time will come in which life will not be simply a matter of bread and toil, nor of idle existence, but *a work of art.*” (350) Futurism nurtures spiritual life as well as life in action, and this brings us to consider yet another aspect of Futurism’s ‘living poetics’: the “New Ethical Religion of Speed” (1916) as the “supreme manifestation of life” (258).

2.2 Life and Transcendence

If Futurism is first of all associated with action-art and with the equation ‘life = aggression,’ in its second phase it evolves towards a spiritual poetics of synthesis, convergence, and transfiguration. Walter Adamson distinguishes a first, mythic phase, in which myth has to be understood as “not a description of the world but a determination to act” (Sorel, qtd. in Adamson 304), from a second, utopian phase, where utopia stands for the rationalistic program of reform instead of revolution (304). In this way, the integrated culture-politics of the early, “heroic” years distinguish themselves from the “party politics coupled with a supportive aesthetics” in the 1920s (309). Adamson in this regard also speaks of Marinetti’s “spiritual transformation” that will bring him to embrace “a spiritualized understanding of fascism” (310).

The 1913 Manifesto “Destruction of Syntax – Untrammelled Imagination – Words-in-Freedom” analyses Futurist sensibility as the result of new technological discoveries which created the circumstances to experience life’s speed, danger, and its sense of the here-and-now in contrast to the hereafter (Marinetti, *Critical Writings* 121). Marinetti’s definition of Words-in-Freedom starts from a definition of lyricism as “that most rare *capacity for inebriating oneself with life and inebriating life with our selves*” (123). The destruction of syntax is advocated for in order to reach the brevity of expression achieved through the absolute freedom of analogies that “embrace the life matter” (125). The “I” is sacrificed in order to make Words-in-Freedom “express the infinitesimally small and molecular life” (126).

In “Destruction of Syntax” the airplane is already mentioned, as well as the fact that speed generates “an immense expansion of our sense of humanity and an urgent need to determine, at every moment, our relations with the whole of

mankind” (122). This “myth” of speed in 1916 becomes a “utopia,” or a “religion-morality” of speed at the core of which stands “transcendence” as part of a Futurist anthropology (Schnapp).⁷ 1916 was also the year in which, according to an important historiographical tradition on Futurism, the movement ends as an avant-garde because its founding myth has been realized with the Great War (Adamson 305). In the “New Ethical Religion of Speed” manifesto, speed is defined in terms of “more life” (Marinetti 257). In the 1929 “Aeropainting Manifesto,” the perspective from the airplane is said to “synthetize” and “transfigure everything” and will soon reach a new plastic and extra-terrestrial spirituality (I Futuristi 85). These transfigural aspects of a “strong” transcendence in which speed becomes “one of the defining attributes of the divine” (Schnapp 4), are further developed in the 1931 “Manifesto of Futurist Sacred Art.” Here Futurism, thanks to its principles of “synthesis, transfiguration, the dynamism of time-space interpenetration, the simultaneity of states of mind and the geometric splendour of the machine aesthetic” (90), is finally able to capture infinity: “Only Futurism – the urgent and swift artistic ‘beyond’ – is able to picture and shape all that lies beyond life itself.” (91) In Futurist aesthetics, art has become a form of life, and a form of the afterlife. Therefore it is possible to ask, with Adamson, if after the utopian phase Futurism has entered in a phase of “creative ‘transformation’” and has come to perform the role of “immanent avant-gardism” that, and here Adamson follows Derrida, “represents and seeks to perform the ‘singularity’ that keeps the system open, that prevents ‘closure’” (313). This singularity could be the Futurist ‘living poetics’ of life.

3 The Urge for Life in Post-war Reconstruction

In the decade between 1926 and 1936 polemic discussions concerning the need for innovation in Italian literature dominated the pages of various literary magazines. Authors and critics were advocating for a new man, culture, literature, and *Weltanschauung*, that stemmed from an urge for more ‘life’ in all these areas. This meant that ‘life’ became a very powerful signifier in the general quest for the ‘new.’

After the Great War, “death could not be used anymore as a poetic image to be invoked with a capital D, nor could life be a well-educated arcadia. Too many

7 For a definition of Futurist transcendence in the terms of Deleuze’s “transcendental field,” see Luisetti 291: “The transcendental field is defined by a plane of immanence, and the plane of immanence by life. In the transcendental field, life is ‘a life,’ events take place at ‘absolute speed’ in a ‘empty time,’ in the non-representational duration of a non-human interval.”

things, too profound, have changed in the soul of young men, especially with regard to the way of feeling art, that is nothing else but the way to reflect the world within oneself" (De Michelis 3). Having suffered too many negative experiences, the thirst for life and reconstruction was widespread among the generation born during the war. Life was not to be interpreted in the Decadent style (an idealized artificial paradise of a small élite of *superuomini*), nor in the Futurist sense of the word (dynamic, vital, aggressive) or, as stated, as a utopian "well-educated arcadia," which the *prosatori d'arte*, also called *calligrafi* (see further) were being accused of. During fascism, the vitalistic connotations of 'life,' and its links with intense, ecstatic, exceptional experiences of *grandeur* and aestheticism were constantly downplayed by the younger generation of writers, as their interpretation of 'life' was supposed to be closely linked to the daily chores of the everyman.

In these polemic discussions held by militant critics, those who pioneered innovation claimed that young writers, like other artists, "have become used to consider life as something morally serious" and have won "the sense of a reality that is to be accepted as what it is, hard or pleasant, it does not matter" (De Michelis 3). One could say, "a kind of optimism through despair" (3). And this "realism" was considered their strength and their higher asset "after all, their novelty is that they are truly and entirely men, and they stay men also in their art" (3). Writing was seen as "a moral act of life," not having "a finality into itself," like in former autonomistic conceptions of *l'art pour l'art* (Granata 9–15).

In the attempt to connect life and art in their theoretical discussions, there are about three perspectives that often, but not necessarily, act together and cross-fertilize. The dynamics can be described as 1) the desire to renew/to rejuvenate art by juxtaposing it to life; 2) the will to document "real life" through art, either by conceiving artistic creation as a way of documenting the surrounding reality, either by using 'real material' into a fictional context; 3) the intent to democratize art by depicting everyday life and using accessible language. These movements can be discerned as well in the effective output (novels and short stories) resulting from this debate.

3.1 Generational Tendencies

The 'art and life'-debate initially began as a discussion lead by twenty-some-things, with a remarkable need to define themselves in generational terms (a *discourse* of 'we' against the 'others'), indicating a clear division with the generation that preceded them: "There is a strong will to affirm here that a 'new' literature, 'new' writers *do* exist, we are." (De Michelis 3)

This “we” was constituted of young writers born around 1905 who made their literary debuts as novelists between 1926 and 1936.⁸ On average, they had all reached the age of 25 in 1930. In an attempt to define this generation of young novelists, Ugo Dèttore (who can be considered an integral part of the “group”) wrote:

The generation that today is twenty-five years old, is adolescent, because those who compose it, feel this way. It is a generation that from a painful experience, almost supported by reflex, drew a need to build itself up from the ground, a need to interpret, according to its own faith, the life that lies ahead; and has the certainty to find only by itself the new energies of a new solution. The problem faced is, *par excellence*, the pure deep problem of the adolescent: the fact that he exists (25).

To observe, understand, and experience life, and not only in a literary way: For these young prose writers, this was one of the primary reasons to call for a separation between them and their direct predecessors (Bocelli), who in the previous decades had gradually retreated into the realm of personal experiences and aesthetics and eventually lost touch with ‘reality.’ In fact, writers of the elder generation (especially those who followed the teachings of *La Ronda*) were accused of putting “aesthetic problems at the base of its justification of life,” of hiding “a void, an inner vacancy” and “a lack of commitment in the face of life” (Anceschi), of being blind to the fundamental problems of life. The previous generation can therefore only be called the generation of the “Decadent” and the “sophisticated intelligent” (Anceschi 266–267). The large gap between the first and second generation of writers that grew up under fascism (that between the so-called “fathers and sons”) apparently crystallized around the divide between art and life: whereas “today’s young people are in life,” the “philosophy and art” of their “fathers” had “lost sight of man” (Granata 9–15).

The critics used the generational divide of the young writers to fit them into a model of radical generational transformation. A common experience, such as the trauma of the Great War (*supra* referred to as “a painful experience” by Ugo Dèttore) and the different ways of having lived it, could indicate another possible track in common that stimulated the sense of belonging to a generation (Wohl 36).

⁸ A number of writers who met these criteria were: Umberto Barbaro, Marcello Gallian and Alberto Loria (1902), Leo Ferrero, Dino Terra (1903), Mario Bonfantini, Alberto Carocci and Eurialo De Michelis (1904), Ugo Dèttore, Leo Longanesi and Berto Ricci (1905), Mario Soldati (1906), Vitaliano Brancati, Giansiro Ferrata, Alberto Moravia and Guido Piovene (1907), Elio Vittorini (1908), Carlo Bernari, Romano Bilenchi, Enrico Emanuelli, Indro Montanelli (1909) and many others.

Aware of their teenage state these youngsters wanted to lend their voice to the many insecurities, hopes, and energies of their age; to do so, they wanted to rebuild literary language almost from scratch, as a further sign of their opposition *vis-à-vis* of the generation that preceded them. Yet this wave of 'renewal' was different from other uprisings of rejuvenation: it was not, for example, violent or brutal as that of the Futurists or the *strapaesani*.⁹ In fact, after several decades of heated debates and positions taken by the avant-gardes, they had become skeptical about too much 'noise.' Their 'contrary way' lent itself to a different interpretation; it was above all functional and ethical¹⁰ in the sense that there was a desire to stand out from previous poetics, not so much in terms of ideas and concrete examples,¹¹ but more likely in terms of 'intellectual behavior' (rhetoric, speeches...), expressing constructive feedback and concrete guidelines on 'how to act' to renew art and society.

It appeared as if the drive for innovation did exclusively belong to the young generation (they tried many times to substantiate this with all sorts of arguments, evidences and apparently 'objective' surveys),¹² it was part, however, of a wider debate that included everyone who supported a renewal of literature and culture in general. The will to oppose the ways of aesthetic writing, in favor of a literature closer to 'life' and 'the common man,' was a sentiment ubiquitous in the cultural debate of the time, and it undoubtedly united writers across the generational fault lines.

3.2 A New Realistic Prose

Which then was the specific stance of the writers debuting around 1930? The answer lies in the literary choices they promoted: In fact, they primarily engaged

⁹ *Strapaese* was a literary movement in favor of a heinous return to the *genius loci*. It arose around 1926 in the pages of magazines such as *Il Selvaggio* and *L'italiano* and was in opposition to *stracittà* and the Novecentismo-movement of Massimo Bontempelli.

¹⁰ "Our best culture arises directly and immediately from practice, which is precisely why practice stands as the basis of the first, and gives it an ethical content, all of its own and completely new." (Drago 134)

¹¹ At times, however, personal attacks were formulated, as happened with Emilio Cecchi and Vincenzo Cardarelli, or when new models to follow were introduced into the debate, such as Alberto Moravia and Corrado Alvaro.

¹² With a survey entitled "Quesiti sulla nuova generazione," the editorial staff of the *Saggiatore* wanted to designate a clear separation between the new generation and its predecessors. The survey took place from April 1932 to January 1933 and covered about ten different journal issues.

with the novel as the main literary means of expression, whereas this was not the case in previous times.

Some years ago, a young writer would hardly turn to the novel; writing novels meant being devoted to a lower literature; or too utilitarian or too naïve. [...] Today is happening just the other way round. Young people who are just starting [...] all equally dream of the novel. Is it a need (as it is often said today) to build? Or is it a desire to reflect closer the life that now seems more rich, animated and interesting than yesterday? (Pancrazi 224–226)

This interest in the novel needs to be considered against the backdrop of the work of European modernists in the 1920s, who in their search for a means of expression for ideas on modern life, found a solution in the novel. In 1929, for instance, Virginia Woolf, after a long-winded hunt for a contemporary solution to the problem of representing the new reality (Herman 70), mirrored concepts as “novel” and “life” to each other: “It is the gift of style, arrangement, construction, to put us at a distance from the special life and to obliterate its features; while it is the gift of the novel to bring us into close touch with life.” (143–144)

During this time in Italy, poetry and lyrical prose were more prestigious genres than the novel, and when emerging young writers in literary magazines proposed to turn to narrative fiction, this choice was a quite outspoken refusal of the dominant literary models. Not infrequently, they were labeled ‘neorealists’ or *contenutisti* (‘champions of content’).¹³ Despite the individual differences between various writers, they all agreed that narrative fiction was the ultimate means to represent their artistic ideas and generational anxieties. The masters to follow, however, were various.

Around 1930 modernists such as “Joyce, Lawrence, Huxley, Doblin, Proust, Gide” inspired many, by the fact that they were able to give a “modern expression of the tireless and cloudy tumult of life, in the way they have seen and sensed it, swarming and inhuman, subject to mysterious occult forces” (Pannunzio 1). Also mentioned were a couple of Italian novelists who, in their view, were unjustly

13 These young writers were rapidly nicknamed *contenutisti* or champions of content, since they were perceived as opponents of the generation of the *prosatori d'arte*, now often referred to as the ‘calligraphers’ (*calligrafi*). The opposition between *calligrafismo* and *contenutismo*, however, went beyond a general and somewhat vague opposition between form and content, embracing a broad spectrum of strategies ranging from the choice of genres and representational strategies over the nature of literary language to diverging ideas on the institutional dimension of literature and its role in media and society. This is, among many others, the case of Eurialo De Micheli’s *Adamo* (1930), Umberto Barbaro’s *Luce Fredda* (1931), Enrico Emanuelli’s *Radiografia di una notte* (1932), Vitaliano Brancati’s *Singolare avventura di viaggio* (1933), Elio Vittorini’s *Garofano Rosso* (1933), Carlo Bernari’s *Tre operai* (1934), Romano Bilenchi’s *Il capofabbrica* (1935), and Ugo Dèttore’s *Quartiere Vittoria* (1936).

treated or even bluntly ignored by the literary world. In a survey on the 'novel' "the new face of Italian literature" was recognized in Svevo, Tozzi, Borgese, Pirandello, and Alvaro, striving "to be European while remaining Italian," because these writers were "finally" able to reflect "our concerns [...], our hopes, in a word, *our way* to understand and adapt to life" (Pannunzio 1).

The young Alberto Moravia should not be forgotten in this list. He debuted in 1929 with *Gli indifferenti* (Times of Indifference, 1932), and caused a stir especially for his use of plain everyday language. His novel was seen as a real turning point and many could agree that it had brought back "life in literature" (De Michelis 3). It was after this book had documented contemporary Roman bourgeoisie life that "other novels came, variously significant, but all or almost in the same direction" (Barbaro 1).

3.3 A Document of Adolescence and City Life

For Elio Vittorini, another emerging author, it was beyond question: Proust and Stendhal were his role models. As a "master" of the internal representation of "young characters," Vittorini followed Proust in particular for his ability to render in an exemplary manner the state of adolescence and the sentiments of youth in prose writing (Vittorini 1).

It is in this last element that a connection between young writers of the period can be found, even if writers as Moravia, Vittorini, Dèttore, De Michelis and others were following different role models. Their fiction dealt primarily with the inner evolution of the (male) adolescent, and the important moments in his life: detachment from the parental home, the first loves and sexual experiences, the interaction with peers, the reverence for an older friend or brother and the desire to be his equal, the conflicts with parents and teachers, as well as everyday experiences in his social environment. A *Leitmotiv* highlighted in all of their novels is the fact that these were all coming-of-age novels in which the younger character goes through a radical evolution, while the other characters remain rather stable.

This evolution is symbolically supported by a number of antagonists or partners, as well as significant events, such as the train journey, a well-known *topos* present both in the genre of the *City Symphony* in avant-garde cinema and in the *Großstadtroman* in literature. In realist and modernist literature, many works open with the image of the displaced traveler who naively enters a big city,¹⁴

¹⁴ Possible examples involve a number of novels and films appealing to the 'arrival in the city' in order to immerse the audience in a hyperbolic enlarged and emotionally gripping 'modern

leaving the rural landscape (however increasingly urbanizing) forever behind in their pasts.

In this sense, it is of rare exception that these ‘neo-realist’ novels are not only about initiation and *Bildung* but also about modern urban reality depicting ordinary events, drawn from the lives of numerous individuals from various settings, classes and communities. Moreover, in order to create realistic effects, non-literary documents are integrated into the narrative, such as letters, diary fragments, small drawings, dialogues, voices and noises that constitute the sociological stance as part of the urban construct (De Cauwer).

A last common thread is the projection of a “democratic-popular countenance” (De Nicola 55) visible in novels that are simultaneously trying to be somewhat refined pieces of literature and authentic depictions of real life. These respective novels try to break out of the narrow circle of elitist literature and reach out to a wider audience. One way of doing this is to avoid the sophistications of Italian literary language and to adopt a style closer to ordinary speech (often but not always rendered in the free indirect speech or in a dialogue form), known by ‘the common man.’ Another way is to interrupt more traditional schemes of linear storytelling by applying ‘visual’ techniques from other media forms (photography, film, painting, or documentary writings as the journalistic travelogue and the personal diary) such as framing and montage techniques, or the insertion of documents (letters and pictures) lest the actions would be introduced verbatim; but suggested by association. These ‘democratic’ techniques are reminiscent of the Futurist principles for a new grammar, more dynamism through synthesis and simultaneity of states of mind. However, for the new prose novel, this all happened in a less aggressive and revolutionary manner, less focused on revolution, but more so with the intent to get closer to the masses.

This democratization of style and language is accompanied by the democratization of some (smaller) literary organizations and institutions, aiming precisely to bridge this gap between the literary elite and the larger audiences of the public. As a reaction to the increasing autonomization of Italian literary institutions that became increasingly exclusive and elitist since about the second half of the 19th century, during the 1920s and 1930s new editorial initiatives, such as cheaper editions, installments in literary journals and in book series (including specialized editions for the young and popular collections), were giving more space to younger non-canonical writers.

situation,’ e. g. novels like *Le ventre de Paris* and *Au Bonheur des dames* (Zola), *Sister Carrie* (Dreiser), *Manhattan Transfer* (Dos Passos), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Döblin), and movies like *Berlin. Symphonie einer Großstadt* (Ruttman), *Asphalt* (May), *The Crowd* (King Vidor).

To conclude, around 1930 the concept of 'life' played a key role in the desire to renew, to document and to democratize literature. The proponents of this new literary culture initially expressed their positions in generational terms, rejecting previous endeavors to unify art and life, which according to them had produced a wrong and dangerous aestheticization (or a flawed revitalization) of art. In the attempt to launch a new kind of novel, they reinterpreted this relationship, using art as a critical tool, as a mirror to query and analyze the modern and tumultuous everyday life (whether it be the life of the adolescent, the common man or the city). 'Life,' on the other hand, received some special connotations during post-war reconstruction. It was in contrast with war, death, and Decadentism and stood equal to renewal, reconstruction and rejuvenation.

With the realism of life more prominent in literature, it thus meant for these writers a de-autonomization for the predominance of the literary duties. The urge for 'life,' was the urge for literature to break out of its ivory tower, and to take on more functions (social, moral, didactic) than the literary function itself, although this breakout was not as violent and radical as the revolutionist avant-gardes. In a way different from Decadentism, and different as well from Futurism, the young prose writers of the 1930s tried to establish a life's artwork in order to create a poetics of reconstruction after the trauma of war.

4 Conclusion

The key concept of 'life' paradoxically combines heteronomist and autonomist conceptions of fiction into oppositional poetical strategies. By turning life into a lifestyle, D'Annunzio preceded the Futurists in their heteronomous artistic interventionism, but Marinetti saw it appropriate to relegate the aesthete's vitalism to the realm of Decadent autonomist eroticism. The literary movement of *nuovo realismo* formulated a new integrated culture-politics of life, rejecting the heteronomous Futurist founding myth of war and reconnecting with autonomist linguistic experimentation and interiorization crossing different geographies and time-frames. If in literary history each group or movement is associated with a new, innovative literary program, defined as well horizontally (as the succession of groups in time) as vertically (on the basis of distinctive hierarchizing principles), the transhistorical concept of 'life' shows how the three literary moments analyzed here are all part of an interrelated network of multiple reactions to Italian modernity and illustrate the complexity of what is more generally called 'literary modernism.'

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