

Luca Somigli. *Legitimizing The Artist. Manifesto Writing and European Modernism 1885-1915*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. viii, 296. ISBN 0-8020-3761-5 \$55, ?35.

This is a well-researched and thought-out intervention on the ever complex issue of what is or was Modernism, the identity and role of the artist during that extended *fin-de-siècle* straddling the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and the expressive forms through which certain major shifts in culture occurred. Beginning with canonical references to Rimbaud and Baudelaire, the author retraces the decline and loss of the Aura of the work of art which characterized the waning decades of the nineteenth century as new social, political and economic dynamics emerged to subvert Romanticism, and the potent negative effects it had on the artists and the sense of their role and mission. One immediate consequence of this turn of events was that artists had to acknowledge that the “Halo” which they sported with pride since before the rise of Modernity (one can think of Petrarch’s coronation as poet laureate) had not only been challenged but had fallen by the wayside, ushering thus a many-sided crisis in the rapport art/world. For one thing, the artist is compelled to adopt a new stance, especially as it becomes clear that the halo is an ideological construct and that, as it can be lost, it can perhaps be re-created as well. In the different cultural contexts of France, Italy, and Anglo America, the reactions are diverse. The umbrella-word *décadence* signals one such reaction: art becomes an “escape,” but at the same time a “prison,” or an “impossible reconstruction,” or even a model for life itself to imitate. Thus we have aestheticism. But another reaction was of the opposite bent: drop the halo and, in fact, make sure that art no longer even strives for it, abandoning the myth of its sacral origins. This is the historical avant-garde, which can be variously traced to symbolism, Mallarmé in particular, and which develops a rather different notion of the autonomy of the work of art than do the decadents.

A classic example of the dwindling distance between artist and the new bourgeois public is represented by forms such as the Feuilleton, which points to the hitherto unconceivable notion that art had anything to do with crass commercialism. Clearly the lines of demarcation become less clear. What Somigli brings to the analysis of this well-trodden, yet ever confused and conflicted state of affairs is a renewed consideration on a form of expression which literally explodes on the scene in the avant-gardist camp, and that is the manifesto. The author illustrates the various ways in which it was impugned by artists in an effort to vindicate alternative forms of legitimation. Drawing on a critical study by Claude Abastado, and juxtaposing it to the historically crucial production of Jean Moréas—the “Manifesto of Symbolism” is from 1886—the author establishes that the manifesto has a fundamental pragmatic aspect to it which can be wielded to achieve different objectives. For one thing, the rhetoric of this form is fundamentally relational, and as such it presupposes an audience. More than that, the manifesto permits the writer to address everyone, an inter-class audience which is presented with a *fait-accompli*, a stance or position not to be questioned but which in turn, and we might say by necessity, generates other discourses around it, about it, or in

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counter position to it. But that is the beginning of the story. For, strong of its initial linguistic ambiguousness—it begs the question of agency, power, and identity, the author argues—even while it explicitly announces a rupture, we must now distinguish between manifestoes of imposition and manifestoes of opposition, that is, those that speak for groups in power, and those that speak for groups who are disempowered. In either case, though, as Jeanne Demers and Line McMurray have demonstrated, the “attack” borne by a manifesto is aimed at destabilizing whatever prior “contract” existed between an artist/group and its institution/community, and it furthermore suggests, and at that forcefully, a displacement and the introduction of a new set of beliefs or practices.

The rest of the book is subdivided into three large chapters dedicated to, respectively, “Strategies of Legitimation: The Manifesto from Politics to Aesthetics,” “A Poetics of Modernity: Futurism as the Overturning of Aestheticism,” and “Anarchists and Scientists: Futurism in England and the Formation of Imagism.” Each chapter is further subdivided into sections, thus we can read a short history of the Manifesto from 1550 to 1850, and how it bears out the opposition between the Prince and the People, with an historically documentable shift in the legitimizing power of the manifesto (through some of its incarnations, such as the “declaration” in the XVIII century, for instance), from the top toward the bottom, or we might say, with the author, from politics to aesthetics. We are also offered close readings of the role of Anatole Baju and of F.T. Marinetti in this problematic shift at the high end of Modernity, a period specifically called Modernism, each representing a phase of the evolution of the reaction to the Kantian separation between art and reality. We recall that the principle of the autonomy of the beautiful demanded that it be trans-historical, that the aesthetic be detached from the pragmatic, a theory which contributed to the formalization of the principle of the autonomy of art. However, as many other critics have pointed out – Somigli cites Berman, Burgher, Eagleton – this aesthetic entered upon hard times during a time in which the notion of an organic society was being shattered, a period marked moreover by a criss-crossing of disciplines and an invasion of the aesthetic by the grim realities of the marketplace and new technologies (one need think only of the impact of photography).

One fruitful suggestion that emerges from the pages of this book is how paradoxical is the path that conjoins Mallarmé to Marinetti, for although the first brings the autonomy of the signifier to its absurd conclusion, suppresses the referent and shatters the linearity of the word and the geometry of the page whilst he still cultivates the rarefied space of the aesthetic, Marinetti continues on the path of the disintegration of established syntax and word order, re-integrates the graphic and visual dimension to verbal expression, yet he clearly embraces the relevance of the *outside world*, especially in its technological dimension now finally cleansed of sentimentalism and aestheticism. But in order to make the connection between art and reality, when confronted with “freed words” or *parole in libertà*, the onus is no longer on the artist but, rather, on to the reader: the principle of analogy now works not to establish what meanings the author might have intended, what secret correspondences there might be implied (as with the first generation of symbol-

ists), but, rather, it essays to re-connect the work to the sense of what is new, different, unstable, chaotic, in fact, what is to come, the future. Marinetti in brief elevated manifesto writing to an art form, but made it into a programme.

Somigli's book is rich and stimulating, and it does compel renewed reflection on this most problematic of periods. I have however a few reservations, and they are of two orders, one rhetorical, the other theoretical. The first has to do with the use of sources to buttress the argument: it appears that as long as a critic said something about any of the authors Somigli reads up close, then it warrants citation. Thus, when discussing the characterization of *décadence* we find him seeking support from such diverse, and in point of fact incompatible, critics as the neoidealist Walter Binni and Elio Gioanola, on the one hand, and the phenomenologist Fausto Curi on the other. Luciano Anceschi is mentioned in the Bibliography but not in the course of the discussion, which is unfortunate since Anceschi had worked out a history of poetics and the dynamics between the autonomy and the heteronomy of art *before* Walter Benjamin, and with specific reference to the problem of *seeing through* the impasse created by the historiographic notion of *decadentismo*. (In the Bibliography, also, the title of Ballerini's book is *La piramide capovolta*, not "rovesciata."). Nor is the author concerned with the fact that the interpretations of the avant-gardes by Burgher, Poggioli and Perloff are strikingly dissimilar and in fact are based on very different presuppositions of what the work of art is and therefore what the avant-gardes mean or have meant. Finally, and in the same historiographic vein, short thrift is made of the relation of the avant-gardes and the postmodern, and Somigli seems to share the widely circulated notion that the latter is but a different aspect, when not a continuation, of the former: "modernism and post-modernism are in fact the two faces of the same experience of alienation on the part of the intellectual." (220) This is very reductive, as it does no justice to the radical changes brought about by the movements of the twenties – for instance, on the heels of the Surrealist manifesto, the poets (and painters) have no longer a desire to communicate with the audience, and this re-trenching of themselves inside an (however elitist) space is markedly *other* than that of the 1890s and early 1900s. And so it is with the aftermath of Modernism, or the neo-avant-gardes of the fifties and the sixties, whether in Italy, France or the USA, where alienation and isolation is explicitly fought and the sense of the rebellion was aimed precisely at regaining currency in the now dominant bourgeoisie culture. This was achieved by acting not as *poeta vate* or poet laureate, a notion vehemently rejected, but, under the inevitable influence of the left, as critics of their own culture as well as of the alienation which now was perceived to be embodied in everyday language and the growing mass media. In brief, alienation is not the same in the two different eras, that of the Modernists or the avant-gardes, and that of the postmoderns, because alienation too – its perception, value and impact upon the constitution of the word – changes over time and influences the interpretation of the previous or a prior period. Finally, matters change again in the seventies and the eighties, when Postmodernism finally surfaces, and questions of alienation and legitimation either are not even posed, or else they are framed against a radically different set

of parameters, albeit often in a confused manner. For the differences I am underscoring, one can look at the work of Diana Krane, Barbara Kruger, Hal Foster and many others, including a 1991 book by this reviewer in which these differences are more clearly and formally explained. I was somewhat surprised that an author familiar with hermeneutics would not consider these shifts in the social dynamics of the world of art, and the discourse of legitimation on the part of the artists, crucial to a reinterpretation of what the stakes were in the period he treats.

One final point concerns the use of the critical category of ambiguity, which I argue is not a category at all, but a way of saying “we don’t know what to make of this”. From the first page, we read that Rimbaud’s emblematic “*il faut être absolument moderne*”, is considered “ambiguous” – and why not as triggering two different but possibly coherent paths of interpretation? At the very end, where the thread the author weaved through French aestheticism, Italian historical avant-gardes and Anglo-American modernism highlights the elements: the self-reflective moment, the attention to formal and structural dimensions of the work and the proliferation of narratives focusing on the artist, we read that “the same gesture” is repeated, arriving at this conclusion: “the production of manifestoes” corresponds to “the textual site where such a process of renegotiation is carried out, in a space that lies *ambiguously* on the threshold between the modern mass media and the traditional venues of literary production” (219, my emphasis). It is too broad a generalization, for the “traditional venues of literary production” have not been so homogenous or constant: artists have turned back upon the re-examination of the structure and formal requirements of the work many other times before, during the Baroque, for instance, or during Romanticism, when challenged by the introduction of new technologies or new social orders. And artists have always been self-reflexive, at least from Virgil onwards, unless one is blinded by idealist-textualist insights whereby artists do not think, do not work toward achieving an effect on a public, or are caught up in aesthetic thrall or meta- or inter-textual self-referencing. My point is that like too many critics of the past generation, especially those who caught the post-structuralist bug, Somigli also relies on this vaguely “undecidable” notion of art as ambiguity, and critical practice itself as ambiguous in some guise or other, in the end telling us either little that is new, or giving the humanities the appearance of indecisive critical thought, blurred distinctions, and vague connections, something which several actors and forces outside of our disciplines will readily seize upon. One need only follow the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, or read a few general surveys on the status of intellectuals and the disciplines in the past twenty years in the United States (such as by Posner, Wilde, Gay, Jacoby), to realize that if the best we can do is to submit interpretations that bank on ambiguity, and by extension on undecidability, or worse eclecticism, then little wonder that between less than transparent government policies and number-crunching shareholder-driven corporations our very liberal education project will be questioned and attacked.

Having said that, I do consider *Legitimizing the Artist* a valid contribution to a very complex and ever-shifting issue. The author scores critical points when he illustrates what is at stake by making methodological recourse to epistemic dia-

grams, such as Jakobson's diagram of the functions of language, (60) to show where the "blockage" in communication occurs, or a semiotic square to connect the lines of influence/exchange when explaining Baju's *décadisme*. (75). Here his criticism is incisive, useful, and does contribute to an understanding of the various vectors at work in the redefinition of slippery role of the artist vis à vis the contrasting poetics that co-exist at any given time. We should recall that even Zola's naturalism upon its first appearance was considered a challenge and a threat to the establishment of arts and letters of the time. Very well argued is also the discussion on Ezra Pound and *imagisme*, which represents an alternative response to the crisis of the role of the artist, one grounded in a belief *internal* to art, as opposed to that of Palazzeschi, for instance, which is grounded on a self-effacing mock-irony still bent on desacralizing poetry. If my reservations above can be read, as I wish them to be read, in a positive manner, then Somigli's book should also foster reflection on, and further research in, the varying legitimation discourses of the artist, and of the critic as well, during the time of the just past *fin-de-siècle*, when Modernism was truly put to rest. It imperative that the critic, once identified ambiguities in the comportment and the actual practices of artists, speak in unambiguous terms in the name of values, contexts, and hypotheses on the impact on society as a whole and the arts in particular of those same comportments and practices.

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