



# TRACES OF ITALIAN FUTURISM IN RUSSIAN EXPERIMENTAL PROSE

## THE CASE OF V. ŠERŠENEVIČ AND L. ZAK

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Alla fine del 1913, il gruppo futurista moscovita del Mezzanino della Poesia (Mezonin Poëzii) diede alle stampe l'almanacco *Krematorij Zdravomyslija* [*Il crematorio del buonsenso*], ultima testimonianza letteraria prima dello scioglimento del gruppo. Questa monumentale pubblicazione, che raccoglie le opere di quattordici poeti che aderirono al Mezzanino, si staglia per il tentativo dei due teorici del gruppo – Vadim Šeršenevič (1893-1942) e Lev Zak (1892-1980, in arte Chrisanf) – di dare forma a un genere di prosa sperimentale che avrebbe dovuto riflettere la vivacità dell'innovazione del linguaggio poetico che caratterizza la stagione futurista in Russia. A partire da un confronto tra i dettami marinettiani e gli scritti teorici sulla prosa che Šeršenevič e Zak (che firmava i propri saggi con lo pseudonimo di M. Rossijanskij) inclusero in questo stesso almanacco, si analizzeranno gli stilemi presenti in tre opere in prosa: due brani tratti dal romanzo incompiuto di V. Šeršenevič *Introdukcija samoubijcy* [*Il preludio del suicida*] e un racconto di L. Zak, *Knjažna Karakaticeva* [*La principessa seppia*]. Quello della prosa è uno degli ambiti meno indagati in assoluto negli studi critici sul futurismo: l'analisi tratterà principalmente le fonti primarie, e farà riferimento alle testimonianze raccolte da V. Markov e V.P. Lapšin. Lo scopo di questo contributo è quello di gettare luce sugli elementi che consentono di verificare l'esistenza di una continuità nello sviluppo della prosa sperimentale futurista italiana e russa. Indagando la misura in cui Šeršenevič e Zak attinsero dai principi teorici e dall'opera dei futuristi italiani, sarà possibile dare una lettura nuova delle loro opere, in prospettiva comparatistica.

At the end of 1913, the Moscow-based Futurist group Mezzanine of Poetry (Mezonin Poëzii) published the almanac *Krematorij Zdravomyslija* [*The Crematorium of the Common Sense*]. The almanac came out right before the group separated and thus represents its legacy. Gathering the works of fourteen poets of the Mezzanine, this voluminous publication stands out for its attempt – set down by the two theoretical leaders of the group: Vadim Šeršenevič (1893-1942) and Lev Zak (1892-1980, who signed his works as Chrisanf and as M. Rossijanskij) – to shape a genre of experimental prose that would reflect the vividness and innovation of the poetic language of Russian Futurism. The present paper analyses the stylistic features of three prose works in the almanac: two excerpts from Šeršenevič's unfinished novel *Introdukcija samoubijcy* [*The Suicide's Prelude*] and L. Zak's short story *Knjažna Karakaticeva* [*Princess Cuttlefish*]. It does so in reference to Marinetti's statements and to Šeršenevič and Zak's theoretical writings on prose, included in the same almanac. Prose is one of the least investigated literary forms in Futurism Studies. Thus, the analysis deals mostly with primary sources and with the documents collected by V. Markov and V.P. Lapšin. The aim is to shed light on the continuity in the development of Italian and Russian Futurist experimental prose and, specifically, to read the works of Šeršenevič and Zak from a new comparative perspective, investigating the extent to which they used the theoretical principles set down by Italian Futurism.

### I INTRODUCTION

In current criticism, even the existence of Futurist prose is subject to debate. To this day, research has focused mainly on poetry, while avant-garde prose has been studied mostly through the broader perspective of Modernism. Thus, little attention has been paid to Futurist prose works and, as a result, prose remains one of the least investigated literary forms in Futurism

studies. This discrepancy originates in two main unsolved problems regarding literary genre and poetics: (a) to what extent a prose writing can be defined as Futurist, and (b) what literary devices or stylistic features make a certain prose work Futurist.

We know that brevity is the main feature of the prose works of this period. Adrian Wanner<sup>1</sup> borrowed the concept of minimalism for his literary investigation on Russian early twentieth century fictive prose and insisted on the importance of the prose poem form. Henryk Baran<sup>2</sup> drew attention to the fragment as a genre, indicating the influence of the German Romantics. Jurij Orlickij<sup>3</sup> grounded his definition of prose miniature on the intertwining of prose and poetry, highlighting the undeniable but undefined connections between Russian Symbolism and the later avant-garde literature. Many of these studies juxtaposed individual writers as paradigmatic of single national literary traditions. Yet, despite the well-known contacts between Italian and Russian Futurists, no attempt was made to investigate their common literary background in prose writing. The result is an almost absolute dearth of scholarship on the subject, and the little scholarship we have consists mostly of anthologies and is rather descriptive.<sup>4</sup>

Another complex problem are the enigmatic and conflicting statements of some of the most important Futurists of the time. For example, Marinetti is reported to have said that there was no Futurist rhyme, and that Futurist prose was a detailed analysis of man's thinking.<sup>5</sup> In opposition, Majakovskij said that Futurist prose did not exist at all.<sup>6</sup> In addition, precisely because scholars of Futurism have concentrated almost exclusively on poetry, there is a significant imbalance in the few critical studies on prose: almost all of them focus exclusively on the works of the major exponents of Russian futurist literature; that is, on those authors who made the most radical experiments and are therefore considered representative of the *Zeitgeist*. Accordingly, these studies consider the members and affiliates of the group Gileja (later known as the Cubo-Futurists) as the most representative expressions of the Russian avant-garde, and they deem the other minor sub-sets of Russian Futurism to be mere epigones.

In 1973, Mario Verdone was one of the first critics to attempt an analysis of Italian Futurist prose. He underlined the urgent need to understand whether

<sup>1</sup> See ADRIAN WANNER, *Russian Minimalism. From the Prose Poem to the Anti-story*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2003, pp. 104-127.

<sup>2</sup> See HENRYK BARAN, *Fragmentarnaja proza*, in *Poëtika russkoj literatury konca XIX – načala XX veka. Dinamika žanra. Obščie problemy. Proza*, Moskva, IMLI RAN, 2009, pp. 463-521.

<sup>3</sup> See JURIJ B. ORLICKIJ, *Dinamika sticha i prozy v russkoj slovesnosti*, Moskva, RGGU, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See MARIO VERDONE, *Prosa e critica futurista*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1973; LUIGI WEBER, *Romanzi del movimento, romanzi in movimento. La narrativa del futurismo e dintorni*, Bologna, Transeuropa, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See VLADIMIR P. LAPŠIN, *Marinetti e la Russia. Dalla storia delle relazioni letterarie e artistiche negli anni Dieci del XX secolo*, Milano, Mart - Skira, 2008, p. 129, n. 85.

<sup>6</sup> «[...] подлинно футуристической прозы нет» [«[...] there is no such thing as futurist prose»], VLADIMIR V. MAJAKOVSKIJ, “Majakovskij o futurizme”, in VIKTOR V. VINOGRADOV (red.), *Novoe o Majakovskom*, Literaturnoe Nasledstvo t. 65, Moskva, Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1958, p. 176. If not otherwise stated, I am the author of the present and the following translations from Russian (in square brackets).

it is legitimate to speak of Futurist “prose” in the first place.<sup>7</sup> He asked whether futurist prose indeed exists given that the most representative form of Italian Futurism was born with Marinetti’s words in freedom, the destruction of syntax, and the abolition of the obsolete elements of narrative. What gradually becomes evident in the writings of the Italian Futurists ever since the early 1910s is the annulment of the distinction between verse and prose in favour of a single expressive form that stresses the relevance of the graphic sign and of a particular research on rhythm (both verbal and visual). Of course, the radical formal experimentalism that characterises Futurist poetry can hardly be found in prose, also because Marinetti insisted mainly on the importance of authorial originality in prose regardless of any rules and norms.

Finally, considering the stylistic evolution of Marinetti’s style – starting from his first published writings, greatly influenced by late eighteenth-century French literature –, Verdone pointed out that the transition from symbolism to futurism can be recognised in the very rhetorical texture of the texts, and specifically in the passage from symbol to analogy, with all the linguistic changes that the latter requires (especially within the principles of Futurist poetics).<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I show that these considerations can constitute an important starting point for a deeper analysis of both Italian and Russian Futurist prose.

## 2 THE MEZZANINE OF POETRY: THEORETICAL WRITINGS ON PROSE

The Mezzanine of Poetry was an independent Futurist group founded in Moscow in the summer of 1913. Although short-lived (it lasted only six months), the group was at the centre of contemporary literary quarrels and functioned as a springboard for several minor Futurist poets, helping them publish. However, most of its activities did revolve around its two better-known founders: Vadim Gabrielevič Šeršenevič (1893-1942) and Lev Zak (1892-1980).

Vadim Šeršenevič was undoubtedly the most prominent figure of the Mezzanine. Vladimir Markov reported that «he made and broke more literary alliances than any other Russian Futurist»,<sup>9</sup> and that this turned him into one of the most controversial figures at the time. Šeršenevič was one of the most active Futurist authors between 1913-16, and he played a pivotal role in the development of the Russian avant-garde. Well-educated and with a strong Western European cultural background, he is known as the first and finest connoisseur of Marinetti’s works amongst the Russian Futurists.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, his attraction to Marinetti was not superficial at all. Šeršenevič had deep first-hand knowledge of Marinetti’s manifestoes and literary works, and

<sup>7</sup> See MARIO VERDONE, *Prosa e critica futurista*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1973, pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 10-13.

<sup>9</sup> VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism. A History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1968, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> See CESARE G. DE MICHELIS, *Il futurismo italiano in Russia 1909-1929*, Bari, De Donato, 1973, p. 41.

he was one of the few Russian futurists – if not the only one – who never concealed an overall positive disposition towards Marinetti's *oeuvre*. In 1913, he published the well-known book *Futurizm bez maski* [*Futurism Without a Mask*], where he set down a detailed evaluation of the Futurist phenomenon discussing both the innovations coming from Italy and the Russian literary experiments. As Markov wrote: «to round out his image as a Futurist leader, Šeršenevič also had to appear as a critic and a theoretician».<sup>11</sup>

Between 1914 and 1916, Šeršenevič published several translations of Marinetti's works.<sup>12</sup> He is also reported to have been one of the few Russian futurists who greeted Marinetti upon his arrival in Moscow in January 1914. Even though this attitude attracted considerable criticism at the time,<sup>13</sup> critics have then recognised the relevance that his publications – which defined the stance of the members of the Mezzanine – had at the time in the debate between journalists and authors around Russian Futurism. As Markov summarised, Šeršenevič's historical importance lies in his acknowledgment of «Marinetti's Futurism as the starting point» as well as in the subsequent attempt to create «a Russian version along the same lines».<sup>14</sup> Relatedly, as De Michelis suggested, further evidence of the clear ties between Italian Futurism and Šeršenevič can be found in the very name of the group: in fact, “the Mezzanine of Poetry” could be a mythologisation of Marinetti's Milanese apartments (from the Italian term “*mezzanino*”).<sup>15</sup>

Several Italian scholars have harshly criticised the Mezzanine of Poetry as the Russian movement most indebted to Italian Futurism. They have dismissed Šeršenevič's attempt to establish a Futurist theory of poetic language

<sup>11</sup> VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> He translated the well-known *Manifesty ital'janskogo futurizma. Sobranie manifestov* [*Manifestoes of Italian Futurism. A Collection*] in 1914 – which he presented to Marinetti as a gift upon his arrival in Russia –, the poem *The Battle of Tripoli* (*Bitva u Tripoli*, Moskva, 1915) in 1915, and the novel *Mafarka the Futurist* (*Futurist – Mafarka*, Moskva, 1916) in 1916.

<sup>13</sup> As in Boris Pasternak's essay *Vassermanova Reakcija* [*The Wassermann Reaction*], published in the 1914 Centrifuge almanac *Rukonog* [*Brachiopod*]. Pasternak relentlessly attacked Šeršenevič, pointing out not only his poetical “debt” to Marinetti but also the long-lasting influence that the Italian poet exerted on the Russian literary scene: «Такое неведение и приводит его к Аппенинскому сапогу: тому самому, которым был дан первый толчок обращению Шершеневича в футуриста; тому самому, след которого не изгладился, вероятно, и по нынешний еще день на половиках московских корридоров» [«Such ignorance leads him to the Appennine boot: to the one who gave Šeršenevič the first push in becoming a futurist, to the one whose footsteps probably have not been erased from the rugs of the corridors of Moscow, even to this day»], *Rukonog*, 1914, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> De Michelis pointed out that in an early 1913 essay on Italian Futurists M. Osorgin mentioned Marinetti's luxury apartments in via Senato as well as his “Red House” in Corso Venezia (the headquarters of Marinetti's literary journal “Poesia” [Poetry]). Both were located in Milan, and, in these apartments, Futurism was debated and developed (see CESARE G. DE MICHELIS, *Il futurismo italiano in Russia 1909-1929*, cit., p. 41 n. 85; and CESARE G. DE MICHELIS, *L'avanguardia trasversale. Il futurismo tra Italia e Russia*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2009, p. 22). Also, De Michelis indicated that the title of the third and last almanac of the Mezzanine, *Krematorij Zravomyslija*, may constitute further evidence of the influence of Italian Futurism on the Mezzanine: the title could be based on a sentence from Marinetti's preface to the first manifesto of Futurism. According to De Michelis, the term ‘crematorium’ is related to the concretisation of Marinetti's exhortation to «break out of wisdom, as if out of a horrible shell», FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, in LAWRENCE RAINEY et al. (eds.), *Futurism. An Anthology*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press 2009, p. 50; see also CESARE G. DE MICHELIS, *L'avanguardia trasversale*, cit., p. 22, n. 52.

as a simple rehash of A.A. Potebnja's teachings.<sup>16</sup> However, Šeršenevič's statements on prose deserve much closer scrutiny than that. The third and last almanac published by the Mezzanine of Poetry, *The Crematorium of Common Sense*, includes two theoretical texts that stand out: *Otkrytoe pis'mo M. Rossijanskomu* [*Open Letter to M. Rossijanskij*] by Šeršenevič and *Iz otrivnogo kalendarja élementarnostej* [*From the Tear-off Calendar of Principalities*] by Lev Zak.

In the *Open Letter to M. Rossijanskij*, Šeršenevič sets down his detailed and extremely lucid reasoning on prose. The text is an attempt to define the genre theoretically and to justify its choice. Šeršenevič immediately tells us that the reason behind the *Open Letter* is the urgent need to reply to a theoretical writing by L. Zak (i.e., Chrisanf, or M. Rossijanskij) entitled *Moment Philosophique* and published in the second almanac of the Mezzanine of Poetry, *Pír vo vremja čumy* [*A Feast During the Plague*].

As Markov argued, Zak's lengthy text is a «rare example in Russian literature of a true literary essay, as written in the West».<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, however, Šeršenevič decided to reply to Zak through the form of the open letter and, as a result, his text took on a hybrid form where the prominent structural and rhetoric elements of essay writing merge with the declarative tone of the ending.

In the text, after recalling Zak's indication of the “word-smell”<sup>18</sup> element of poetry, Šeršenevič proceeds to establish a list of four aspects of the poetic word (undoubtedly reminiscent of A.A. Potebnja's tripartite word subdivision): “word-smell”, “word-sound”, “word-content”, and “word-image.”<sup>19</sup> He focuses mostly on the relevance of the last two: “word-content” and “word-image.”<sup>20</sup> The former is defined as the meaning that a word carries in itself. The latter represents the visual character that a word preserves in its depiction of an extralinguistic referent. The mutual relationship of these two aspects is central, for Šeršenevič: words are generated intuitively because of

<sup>16</sup> See MICHELE COLUCCI, *Futurismo russo e futurismo italiano: qualche nota e qualche considerazione*, in «Ricerche Slavistiche», XXII (1964), p. 160; CESARE G. DE MICHELIS, *Il futurismo italiano in Russia 1909-1929*, cit., p. 42, n. 88. It is worth mentioning that major scholars of Russian Futurism like Vladimir Markov and Nikolaj Chardžiev dismissed the Mezzanine as a Moscow branch of Peterburgese Ego-Futurism. See NIKOLAJ I. CHARDŽIEV, *Ot Majakovskogo do Kručenyča. Izbrannye raboty o ruskom futurizme*, Moskva, Gileja, 2006, p. 130; VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., pp. 102-104.

<sup>17</sup> VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> Lev Zak's first use of the locution “word-smell” appears in the polemic writing *Perčatka Kubo-futuristam* [*Throwing Down the Gauntlet to the Kubo-futurists*], published in the first almanac of the Mezzanine of Poetry – *Vernissadž* [*Vernissage*] – under the pseudonym M. Rossijanskij. Here, Zak engages in a quarrel-like point-by-point response to the Kubo-Futurist theory of the self-sufficient word [*samovitoe slovo*], and he argues that the word should not be seen as a mere combination of sounds but rather as an interrelation of sensible qualities evoking multiple associations: «Можно сказать, что каждое слово имеет свой особый запах» [«One can say that every word has its own particular smell»] (*Vernissadž*, 1913, p. 23). As Lawton noted, in this piece Zak established «the fundamental difference between the Mezzanine and Kubo-futurism», and he also gave «a definition of what was to become the central core of Mezzanine theory» (ANNA LAWTON [ed.], *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 28).

<sup>19</sup> See *Krematorij*, 1913, pp. 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> See Šeršenevič's references to «слово-содержание» and «слово-образ» in *ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

the image they “preserve” or evoke while their content is the result of mental processes.<sup>21</sup>

Šeršenevič analyses some sample expressions and concludes that, when they first appeared in language, they were not a combination of “word-contents” but a fusion of “word-images.” This initial part of the *Open Letter* follows the speculations on the nature of language that the Russian Symbolists had debated since the late nineteenth century, and it constitutes the foundation of several concepts on which Šeršenevič grounds his innovative approach to prose. Consider the following excerpt as an example of the novelty contained within this text:

«Поэзия освободилась от роля прислуги, и ей к лицу гордый лозунг: искусство для искусства. Но почему никто не обратит внимания на прозу? Прозы у нас нет. [...] Прозы для прозы мы не знаем».<sup>22</sup>

That a Russian Futurist almanac contained such theoretical reflections on the essence of literature and its most technical aspects was nothing new. The real novelty here resides in the attempt to shift the reader’s attention to the ancillary role of prose at the time. This makes the *Open Letter* the only theoretical writing of Russian Futurism where the relevance of prose is discussed in detail.

In it, Šeršenevič affirms that, unlike poetry, prose has not undergone any significant development. To delve deep into this problem, he considers two of the most radical efforts to renew Russian artistic prose known at the time: A. Belyj’s notorious experiments in rhythmic prose (the *Symphonies*) and B. Livšič’s *People in a Landscape*.<sup>23</sup> Šeršenevič provides an overall evaluation of these attempts: in his view, Belyj failed – despite being initially “on the right track” – because of his excessive interest in phonetic and semantic orchestra-

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> [«Poetry was liberated from its ancillary role, and this proud slogan suits it well: art for art’s sake. But why does no one pay attention to prose? We do not have any prose. [...] We do not know prose for prose’s sake»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Although not usually included amongst the most radical Russian Futurists, Benedikt Livšič practiced the destruction of grammar in the brief prose writing *Ljudi v pejzaže*, published in the almanac *Poščečina obščestvennomu vkusu* [*Slap on the Face of Public Taste*, 1912]. As Wanner highlighted, most of the literary devices employed by Livšič involve a particular usage of the instrumental case, as well as unusual choices in the use of prepositions, see ADRIAN WANNER, *Russian Minimalism*, cit., pp. III-112. It is not unlikely that Livšič was influenced by Marinetti’s statements on the destruction of syntax in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (1912). Livšič himself pointed out these experimental tendencies in his memoir *The One and a Half-eyed Archer*, where he not only described his prose work as a verbal rendition of Cubism but also referred to his style as “mute prose” and “fragmented syntax”. See BENEDIKT LIVŠIČ, *Polutoraglaznyj strelec. Stichoivorenija, perevody, vospominanija*, Leningrad, Sovetskij Pisatel’, 1989, pp. 338-340. As Lapšin remarked, Livšič was the only one of the fellow poets of the Gileja group whose refined education qualified him as a “theoretical leader”. Moreover, Lapšin reports that D. Burljuk encouraged Livšič to become “their own Marinetti” on several occasions, but Livšič declined. See VLADIMIR P. LAPŠIN, *Marinetti e la Russia*, cit., p. 71 and BENEDIKT LIVŠIČ, *Polutoraglaznyj strelec*, cit., p. 389.

tion<sup>24</sup>, while Livšić's purpose of destroying grammar was just pointless and absurd.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, Šeršenevič investigates another possibility, and this constitutes a turning point in the attempt to develop a new form of prose. He casts light on the fact that the predominance of the semantic component of the word is considered mandatory in prose, and he questions the essence of this assumption and deems it mere habit. He thus adopts the opposite stance: the semantic aspect of the word is not a literary device because it does not allow us to distinguish between artistic prose and other genres. Thus, he advocates for a necessary re-evaluation of the stylistic features that characterise artistic prose, and he answers his conclusive rhetorical question – «как пользуется писатель словом в художественной прозе?»<sup>26</sup> – by overturning the predominance of the inner aspects of the word and therefore making the semantic aspect the least important one.

This shift in paradigm overlaps with an alteration in Šeršenevič's register. In the final part of the *Open Letter*, several stylistic features emerge that allow us to compare it to Italian Futurist manifestoes in both content and form. Šeršenevič here uses a particularly strong hortatory style, employing the strongest means of deontic modality as he highlights the necessity of a stylistic renewal in prose writing: «Писатель должен пользоваться “словом-образом” при художественной прозе. Он должен отрешиться от “слова-содержания”».<sup>27</sup> He then provides an explanation in order to mitigate his statements for the sake of persuasion:

«Если мы примем этот метод, то увидим, что проза будет сочетанием слов-образов, подобно тому, как поэзия есть сочетание “слов-запахов”».<sup>28</sup>

Note here the use of “we”<sup>29</sup> and the hypothetical construction. The Russian poet softens the tone of his declarative statements to persuade the reader of the benefit of endorsing his new methodological proposal for artistic prose. He also stresses once again the essential need for the *obraz* [image],

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<sup>24</sup> «Он стоял почти на правильном пути, но увлечение звуковой и смысловой инструментровкой отклонило его от главного», in *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 33. On the same page we find a footnote reference to Belyj's novel *Peterburg* where the editors state that Šeršenevič may have overlooked Belyj's mastery in experimental prose because he had not read the recently published chapters.

<sup>25</sup> See *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> [«How does a writer make use of the word in artistic prose?»], *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> [«The writer must use the “word-image” in artistic prose. He has to get rid of the “word content”»], *ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> [«If we adopt such a method, then we will see that prose is a combination of word-images, just as poetry is a combination of “word-smells”»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> The use of the first-person pronoun with which the author expresses the main statements of the theoretical writing – be it a declarative text or an essay – is pivotal in the manifesto, according to the studies on the form. In this sense, J. Lyon's definition of *multivocality* is particularly interesting as it points out at the metonymic function by which the authorial-I can represent a group of people. See JANET LYON, *Manifestoes. Provocations of the Modern*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 20-26.

which he conceives as the purest and most virginal aspect of the word.<sup>30</sup> In retrospect, these final remarks are antecedents to what would become the *slovo-obraz*: the central concept of Imaginism.<sup>31</sup>

Most specifically, the stylistic structure of these sentences recalls Marinetti's tirades in the programmatic statements of the 1912 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*. As noted above, although the *Open Letter* is not formally a declarative text, it borrows some of the core features of the manifesto, including modal auxiliaries, rhetorical questions, assertive statements, etc. In terminological terms, Seršenevič's concept of "word-image" can be considered not only in light of A.A. Potebnja's definition of the "inner form" of the word – as several scholars have noted – but also as influenced by Marinetti's statements on analogical thought. Thus, considering the arguments about poetic image in the *Technical Manifesto* can help us further investigate this influence on the Russian poet.

In the seventh section of the manifesto, Marinetti insists that writers must use the «most extensive analogies»:

«Analogy is nothing other than the deep love that binds together things that are remote, seemingly diverse or inimical. The life of matter can be embraced only by an orchestral style, at once polychromatic, polyphonic, and polymorphous, by means of the most extensive analogies. [...] Images are not flowers to be chosen and gathered with parsimony [...]. They constitute the very lifeblood of poetry. Poetry should be an uninterrupted flow of new images [...]. The vaster their affinities, the more images will retain their power to astound. One must —people say— spare the reader an excess of the marvelous. Bah!».<sup>32</sup>

This passage manifests the first relevant point of contact between Italian Futurist aesthetics and Seršenevič's proposals on prose. The Russian poet's theoretical principles prove indeed to be a summary of Marinetti's ideas on analogy. In particular, Marinetti's views on the function of analogy and on the centrality of image in the amazement of the reader are direct antecedents to Seršenevič's *slovo-obraz*. In addition, in the eighth and ninth sections of the manifesto, Marinetti provides many further elements that anticipate both Seršenevič's theoretical proposals and his experimental attempts at prose. Marinetti insists on the need to give the poetic image a definitive primary role, and he sees in the procedure of juxtaposition an obligatory step towards the full realisation of the "chain of analogies" technique.<sup>33</sup> In the *Open Letter*, Marinetti's influence is veiled, but as will become evident below, Ser-

<sup>30</sup> «Нам в слове нужен его девственное состояние: его образ» [«We need the word in its most virginal state: its image»], in *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Imaginism is the name of another Moscow-based avant-garde poetic movement, founded by Seršenevič after the 1917 revolution.

<sup>32</sup> See FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, in LAWRENCE RAINEY et al. (eds.), *Futurism. An Anthology*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup> «In some cases it will be imperative to join images two by two, like those chained iron balls which can level a stand of trees in their flight», FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, cit., p. 121.

šenevič draws directly from Marinetti's principles when he writes his experimental prose.

Marinetti recognizes the inevitability of referring to traditional narrative structures but, for him, this does not preclude the possibility of realising the innovative device of the "net of images".<sup>34</sup> Consider the form of the prose that Marinetti quotes in support of his statements.<sup>35</sup> He provides examples from his novel *Mafarka the Futurist* that seem to have directly inspired Šeršenevič and Zak in their prose compositions. In the next section, we will see the traits in syntax, rhythm, and in the central role given to the image that all these writings share.

For now, I should highlight that a specific structural element of the almanac must be addressed: the placement of the theoretical texts in relation to the literary writings. Surprisingly enough, the *Open Letter* follows the three prose experiments as if it were a sort of theoretical afterword. Attention to this structural choice should not be neglected: the most common practice in Russian Futurist almanacs was to place the theoretical writings (most often declarative texts like a manifesto or a *vozzvanie*) at the beginning.<sup>36</sup> Here, instead, even the other fundamental theoretical writing – Zak's *From the Tear-off Calendar of Principialities* – follows the *Open Letter*.

In *From the Tear-off*, Zak (under the pseudonym M. Rossijanskij) sketches several reflections on poetics. He presents his own perspective, trying to define «the differences among the main literary movements of the day».<sup>37</sup> One of the most interesting traits of this text is its discussion of the peculiarities of Realism, Symbolism and Futurism. Zak's attempt to summarise each movement's poetic features may appear to be too simplistic or trivial, but this

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<sup>34</sup> «Except for the traditional festoons of its form, the following passage from my *Mafarka the Futurist* is an example of such a dense net of images» (FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, cit., p. 121).

<sup>35</sup> See Marinetti's examples taken from *Mafarka the Futurist* and *The Battle of Tripoli*, in *ivi*, p. 120-122.

<sup>36</sup> This is, e.g., what Cubo-Futurist authors did, often referring to excerpts of their own poetry to explain or clarify the theoretical statements presented in their introductory manifestoes. As Martin Puchner explained: «So strong was the dependence of the manifesto on poetry that many Russian manifestos quote from the poems composed in the spirit of the theories laid out» (MARTIN PUCHNER, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-garde*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 102-103). Puchner's analysis deals mainly with Cubo-Futurist authors – Chlebnikov and Kručenyč in particular – because they devoted extended efforts to the development of literary principles that would lead them to be recognised as the main representatives of Russian Futurism. I would argue that we can interpret the opposite editorial organisation of the *Mezzanine* of Poetry's almanac as a hidden hint to their ongoing polemics against the Cubo-futurists.

<sup>37</sup> VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 116.

is because of his use of soliloquy in a Western-inspired writing style that was rather uncommon in the Russian theoretical writings of that period.<sup>38</sup>

Each of Zak's «sketches on poetic themes»<sup>39</sup> is introduced by the name of a day: Monday, Sunday, and Friday. Each sketch can be read independently: they are not strictly inter-dependent in content nor form. Yet, the inverted ordering of the days may suggest that the sketches should be read backwards,<sup>40</sup> and in this sense they could form a single coherent essay that begins with “Friday”,<sup>41</sup> where Zak provides the summaries of literary movements and interprets Futurist aesthetics. This could help explain why Zak frequently mentions the “Hottentots.” Given the etymology of this racial term, its use could be a mocking reference to the Cubo-Futurists and their *zaum*’ experiments, which were the constant object of Zak’s fiercest criticism since the publication of *Vernissage*, the first almanac of the Mezzanine of Poetry. “Monday” and “Sunday” are the two sketches in which this reference occurs the most, and in them Zak openly polemicalises against the Cubo-Futurists by alternating serious debate on strictly poetical questions with mockery and rhetorical exclamations. As Andrej Krusanov noted, most of Zak’s remarks here focus on verse and are intended as continuations of what he said in *Moment Philosophique*.<sup>42</sup> However, a specific passage of these three soliloquies-allegories on form and content deserves further attention. This is where Zak outlines his understanding of Futurist aesthetics as a member of the Mezzanine of Poetry:

«Футурист: Рой, рой глубже! Ищи в земле золото, камни, несчастную любовь, кости мамонта – ищи, что хочешь, но ищи усердно и не делай ни лишних движений, ни ненужных жестов, будь целесообразен и экономен в своих поисках – мне совершенно все

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<sup>38</sup> Theoretically, this stylistic choice sheds light on the influence that the reader-oriented register of declarative texts had on the other genres of non-artistic prose writing. Not only that: as Markov argued, this choice allowed Zak to express the «most concise statement of the Mezzanine aesthetics» (VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 116). But I would argue that it also revealed the existence of several subtler points of contact between Italian Futurism and the Mezzanine of Poetry. These ties can be seen in Zak’s preference for a more performative-like written speech act where the persistence of “theatricality” can be recognised. “Theatricality” was a core feature of Italian Futurist writings: regardless of public performances and *soirées*, “theatricality” emerges in the texts themselves, especially in the manifestoes, as Claude Abastado and Martin Puchner observed: see CLAUDE ABASTADO, *Introduction à l’analyse des manifestes*, in «Littérature», XXXIX (1980), p. 10-12 and MARTIN PUCHNER, *Poetry of the Revolution*, cit., p. 25-26.

<sup>39</sup> This definition belongs to V. Markov. See VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 116.

<sup>40</sup> The backwards ordering of the days, based on the occurrence of the most significant events of Orthodox Easter (Holy Friday, Easter Sunday, Bright Monday) could be hypothetically tied to Zak’s quotation of Vasilij Rozanov’s aphorism from *Fallen Leaves* (see *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 35) and to the pivotal role that the Resurrection of Christ plays in his late thought.

<sup>41</sup> In the original version: *Pjatinica. Tri allegorii o forme i sodržanii*, see *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> See ANDREJ KRUSANOV, *Russkij avangard 1907-1932. Istoričeskij obzor v trech tomach*, tom I, kniga 2, Moskva, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2010, p. 89.

равно, что ты найдешь там: я смотрю на твои движения – в них и твоя душа, и вся соль вселенной!»<sup>43</sup>

This rather concise statement shows adherence to the principles that Šeršenevič established in the *Open Letter*. With that specific rhetorical construction, Zak insists on a rather common imagery of human gestures to create an allegory for poetic research. Like physical efforts, experiments in poetic form must be thoughtful and expedient and avoid energy waste. As with the movements of the human body, the main significance of a literary work lies in its form.

Zak's thought should be understood in its broadest sense because this statement on the primacy of form over content concerns prose too. The influence of Italian Futurism here is least evident, but Zak certainly knew the Italian manifestoes either first-hand or through Šeršenevič's theories. He was also known as a well-educated man especially well-versed in French poetry, as Chardžiev reported.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, he may very well have been familiar with Italian Futurism from the very beginning, given his intellectual stature. Finally, he was also a painter, and therefore one could interpret the above imagery of movement and its relation to effort («лишних движений [...] ненужных жестов») as another veiled reference to the dynamism of Italian Futurism.<sup>45</sup>

### 3 ŠERŠENEVIČ AND ZAK'S PROSE WORKS

At the end of the *Open Letter*, Šeršenevič includes sample experiments of how the new form of «pure artistic prose» should look.<sup>46</sup> These “experiments in prose” – as the sections of the almanac in which these works appear are titled – are presented with a footnote in which the editors (Šeršenevič and Zak amongst others) refer to the *Open Letter* for further discussion on the method of their composition.<sup>47</sup> In a particularly noteworthy passage of the *Open Letter*, Šeršenevič gives a brief commentary on the three prose works: he describes Zak's short story as “more epic” and his own two pieces as characterised by a “lyricism” that derives from their being excerpts from “a big novel”.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> [«The futurist: Dig! Dig deeper, look for stones, gold, unrequited love, or the bones of a mammoth, whatever you like; but do it carefully and do not make any superfluous movement, any unnecessary gesture. Be rational and thrifty: it does not matter what you find; I am looking at your movements: there lies your soul, and all the salt of the universe»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> See NIKOLAJ I. CHARDŽIEV, *Ot Majakovskogo do Kručenyča*, cit., p. 166.

<sup>45</sup> These are pure assumptions, as there is no evidence of direct contacts between Zak and Marinetti nor explicit references to Italian Futurism in Zak's works.

<sup>46</sup> See *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> «Их происхождение и метод их творчества – в ниже напечатанном открытом письме.» [«Their origin and composition method are to be found in the following open letter»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> «[...] один рассказ [принадлежат] – нашему милому Хрисанфу. Он более эпичен. Лиричность моих отрывков объясняется тем, что они *выорки* из большого романа», [«[...] one short story [belongs to] our dear Chrisanf. His story is more epic. The lyricism of my excerpts is explained by the fact that they are *fragments* taken from a big novel»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 33.

However, overall, these three prose texts are examples of “logical” writing: their main feature is the mixing of narrative layers, and the relevance of the plot is minimal. Markov identified the depiction of «life in a future of skyscrapers and technology» as the core feature of Šeršenevič’s two excerpts, defining his writing style «simple and lucid».49 Šeršenevič’s prose experiments are clear attempts to put into effect his idea of a new form of prose “for prose’s sake”. In them, the centrality of the *obraz* aspect of the word translates in the full potential that an image can evoke. The predominance of intuition over semantics, which characterises both excerpts, stands out from the very beginning: «Аэро было небольшое. Поэт говорил по привычке банальные новости и вытаскивал из своего мозга зеленых червячков».50

Šeršenevič uses a series of images, selected on the basis of their intensity and capacity to estrange the reader. The final distancing effect is achieved through a layered rhetorical construction whose result is complex and refined. First, consider the main figure of speech that Šeršenevič employs: the metaphor. The most common metaphors are visual and non-linguistic, and Šeršenevič often uses oxymoronic combinations and quasi-synthetic juxtapositions, e.g.: «Свеже зернистая покойность была очень вкусная; облака, оказывается, отличные салфетки [...] Хлеб из черных градовых туч, если его намазать солнечным маслом, гораздо вкуснее. Мы весело болтали [...] за чашкой черной ночи».51 Šeršenevič plays with the contrast created by attributing sensorial qualities (mostly tactile and gustative) to traditionally intangible and ineffable referents. In this sense, Markov highlights that the imagery used in this first prose excerpt «mixes meteorology and gastronomy».52 But we should also recognise the influence of Italian Futurism on the conceptual overturning that motivates this mix: this becomes apparent because Šeršenevič confers both material and trivial characterisations to atmospheric phenomena. Aside of the imagery, the Italian influence becomes particularly evident if we compare Šeršenevič’s technique of combining metaphors to both Marinetti’s “chains of analogies”, «though

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49 VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 115. Moreover, Markov suggests a possible comparison between Šeršenevič and «similar attempts by Chlebnikov». Here, the scholar is most likely referring to the last narrative part of the hybrid essay *Мы и дома* (*We and our houses*, 1914-15), in which Chlebnikov depicts the feasible architecture of the future. However, there are no similarities in the writings of Šeršenevič and Chlebnikov, neither in content nor in style. In opposition to Šeršenevič, Chlebnikov’s urban-inspired imagery is imaginary, and his style is more weighed and deliberate.

50 [«The aero was small. The poet, by habit, told banal news and took of out of his brain little green worms»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 24.

51 [«The fresher grainy stillness was very tasty; the clouds, it seems, were excellent tissues [...] Bread made from black hail-clouds is much tastier when spread with sun-butter. We chatted gladly with a cup of black night»], *ibid.*

52 VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism*, cit., p. 115.

still masked and weighed down beneath traditional syntax»<sup>53</sup>, and other theoretical statements on the labour of literary creation<sup>54</sup>.

The second layer of Šeršenevič's technique comprises two sublevels: one characterises the single sentences and how the images evoked by the different metaphors relate to one another, the other concerns the relations between the sentences from a broader perspective. Consider the following sentences: «Кокотка подводила веселым карандашом душу. Я надел на мое сердце пенснэ и разглядывал воздушных проституток»<sup>55</sup>. Each of these sentences corresponds to a different narrative layer and can be understood as a complex metaphor that itself results from a construction of metaphors. The reader is called upon to take on an active role and overlap the narrative layers. Stretching the boundaries of each metaphor, Šeršenevič achieves an analogical effect whereby the deeper significance of a single sentence, when juxtaposed to subsequent sentences, produces contrasting imagery in the reader's mind. Such an effect can be interpreted as the perfect embodiment of the intuition over semantics principle, as it is stated in the *Open Letter*, and it proves to be in continuity with Marinetti's statements on the analogical style.<sup>56</sup>

The third and most relevant layer is syntactical. The most important stylistic features that emerge in Šeršenevič's prose are the skilful use of the paratactic structure and the frequent use of asyndeton:

«Небоскребы поплыли вниз. Мы заглядывали в окна потому, что это ужасно весело. В одной комнате качался оскаленный ужас на полотенце. В другой студент готовился к страстному экзамену и

<sup>53</sup> Let us consider the following excerpt, taken from the *Battle of Tripoli*: «Ah yes! little machine gun, you are a fascinating woman, and sinister and divine, at the steering wheel of an invisible hundred-horsepower engine that roars with explosive impatience. [...] For me, you resemble a lawyer before the bar, whose tireless, eloquent tongue strikes to the heart of the surrounding listeners [...]», FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, cit., p. 121. In these combinations of images is evident that Marinetti interprets the poetic word to be the intuitive result of an interrelation of sensible qualities evoking multiple associations. Such a structural principle would have become crucial for the *Mezzanine of Poetry* since the publication of their first almanac *Vernissage* a year later. See *Vernissage*, 1913, p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Several months after the publication of the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, Marinetti felt the urgency to publish a point-by-point response to the criticism that European press directed against the manifesto itself. In this writing, Marinetti comments the tirades of the *Technical Manifesto* in a more detailed manner, dwelling on some stylistic features and principles that are evident in the aesthetics of the *Mezzanine* as well, such as the relationship between rational intelligence and intuition in literature and the necessity for a stylistic renewal. Among these comments, there is one passage that could be seen as a sort of antecedent both to Šeršenevič's pilot motif (in the aero), and to his exteriorising of innerness, on which I shall return later: «The hand that writes seems to separate from the body and freely leaves far behind the brain, which, having itself in some way become detached from the body and airborne, looks down from on high with terrible lucidity upon the unforeseen phrases emitted by the pen», FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *A Response to Objections*, in LAWRENCE RAINEY et al. (eds.), *Futurism. An Anthology*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>55</sup> [«A coquette was putting make-up on her soul with a cheerful pencil. I put a pince-nez on my heart and examined the aerial prostitutes»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 24.

<sup>56</sup> See the sections n. 8 and n.9 of the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, in FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, cit., p. 121. It is possible to find further evidence of such shared theoretical positions in Marinetti's reflections on intuition in other writings of the same year: «I aspire to render the illogical succession, no longer explanatory but intuitive, of the second terms of many different analogies which are all disconnected and quite often opposed to one another» (FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *A Response to Objections*, cit., p. 126).

зубрил. Иногда, желая проверить себя, раздевался и перед зеркалом рассматривал себя с пяток до губ. Небоскребы вросли в землю до крыш и только трубы торчали рифово».<sup>57</sup>

These syntactical devices are employed to confer a fast-paced rhythm to the text. Indeed, rhythm is the key to the success of the estranging process. Šeršenevič wants the reader to grasp the inner aspect – the image – of the words and sentences he juxtaposes. The success of this literary device does not depend on the simple juxtaposition of different elements, nor on the diversity of the image they evoke. Scene after scene, the images alternate and recreate a sort of antecedent to the montage technique that would later be employed in Imaginism.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, once again, montage proves to be fundamental in Futurist literature, both Italian and Russian. Without it, Futurist analogy-related literary devices would be deprived of their primary visual component and so would not succeed.<sup>59</sup>

In the second prose excerpt, Šeršenevič uses the same structural technique, but the imagery changes substantially. He still plays with contrasts and once again materialises the intangible (the sky, mental processes, etc.), but he also represents a more explicit exteriorising of innerness,

«Я снял мои мысли и пристально протер мозги. Сердце отчаянно чесалось, и я взял в руки воспоминанье и почесал им сердце».<sup>60</sup>

and anthropomorphising of the city, that he describes as a conductor:

«Город надел черный фрак. В жилетный вырез вставил несколько электрических фонарей и постучал заводской трубой по пюпитру неба».<sup>61</sup>

In this passage, it is possible to see the presence of some stylistic features recalling Marinetti's imagery: it is worthwhile to mention an excerpt from the *Battle of Tripoli*, as Marinetti presented it in the *Technical Manifesto* as an example of the “net of images” technique:

<sup>57</sup> [«The skyscrapers swam downwards. We looked through the windows because it was awfully fun. In one room there was unsettling smiling horror swinging on a towel. In another room a student was preparing a frightening exam and crammed. Sometimes, testing himself, he took off his clothes and examined himself head to toe in front of the mirror. The skyscrapers staked to the land and only the chimneys stuck out like the reef»], *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> The frequent use Imaginists made of this technique is discussed in TOMI HUTTUNEN, *Montage in Russian Imaginism: Poetry, Theatre and Theory*, in «Sign System Studies», XLI (2013), pp. 219-229.

<sup>59</sup> It is worthwhile to recall Marinetti's imperative to «join images two by two» mentioned earlier in this paper.

<sup>60</sup> [«I took off my thoughts and carefully wiped off my brain. My heart was itching frantically, and I took my memories and with them scratched my heart»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> [«The city wore a black tailcoat. It put several electric lamps in its waistcoat and with the chimney of a factory knocked on the stand of the sky»], *ibid.*

«The orchestra conductor-sunset, with a sweeping gesture, gathers in the scattered flutes [...], and the grieving harps of the insects, and the sound of crushed stones. Suddenly he stops the tympanums of the mess kits and crashing rifles [...], the desert displays her immense bosom in curvaceous liquefaction, aglow with rouge beneath the cascading jewels of the monstrous night».<sup>62</sup>

While Šeršenevič's prose undoubtedly differs from Marinetti's excerpts from the syntactical point of view, as the structures employed in *Mafarka* and in the *Battle of Tripoli* prove to be mostly hypotactic, the common imagery elements seemingly dispel any doubt about the relevance of the influence of Italian Futurism.<sup>63</sup>

In the end of this second excerpt, we find echoes of a key element of the first one: once again Šeršenevič mentions the *aero*, the vehicle on which the narrating voice is flying: «[...] мое желание сломалось или не хватило страсти, и аэро не дошумел».<sup>64</sup> This reference not only indicates a continuity between the two prose writings but also underlines the influence that Italian Futurist technological and urban motifs had on Šeršenevič.

Anna Lawton discussed in detail the ties between Marinetti's tirades and Šeršenevič's remarks on the primary function of imagery in poetry, at least with regards to the Imaginist shift in the Russian poet.<sup>65</sup> She pointed out the similarities between Imaginism and Italian Futurism, but she did not discuss the role of prose in the process of development of poetic theories. We should not ignore that most of the examples that Marinetti provided in the *Technical Manifesto* – when discussing devices like the “chain of analogies” and the “network of images” – are taken from his own prose writings, including the collection of short stories *The Battle of Tripoli* and the novel *Mafarka the Futurist*. As mentioned, these two works were translated by Šeršenevič and published in 1915 and 1916. Therefore, it is highly probable that in late 1913, when the almanac *Krematorij zdravomyslija* was under pre-

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<sup>62</sup> FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, cit., p. 122.

<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the fact that Šeršenevič apparently resorted to the same images occurring in one of Marinetti's excerpts for one of his prose samples, both of which were written as such to provide an effective example of how Futurist techniques should have been employed by other authors deserves further consideration, as it seems to confirm the hypothesis of the direct influence of Marinetti's style on Šeršenevič's prose.

<sup>64</sup> [«[...] My desire was broken, or it lacked passion, and the aero did not start»], *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> See ANNA LAWTON, Šeršenevič, *Marinetti and the “Chain of Images”*. *From Futurism to Imaginism*, in «The Slavic and East European Journal», XXIII, 2 (1979), pp. 203-207.

paration, Šeršenevič was already well-acquainted with Marinetti's prose works.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, Šeršenevič describes his two excerpts as parts of a yet-to-come novel, but the impression they leave is that they are meant as nothing more than exercises in style, and that they are included in the almanac to provide examples of how prose should be written according to Šeršenevič's ideals. Yet, the truth is that these pieces are modelled after Marinetti's theory of prose. The above-mentioned footnote alludes to a novel of which there is no evidence at all. Therefore, one is justified in approaching these two excerpts as independent. They are self-sufficient in the same way that Marinetti's self-referenced prose excerpts in the *Technical Manifesto* are, and this supports the assumption that they were written after the *Open Letter* to justify the proposal of this new theoretical method. If this is the case, then the structural disposition of the almanac – whereby the prose experiments precede the theoretical writings – represents an attempt to convince readers and critics that the opposite was in fact the case.

These observations are significant in several major respects. The fundamental feature of Šeršenevič's writings is the destabilising use of metaphor: not only in the de-structuring of typical verbal automatisms or calembours but also in a broader subverting process. Intertwining reality with abstraction, Šeršenevič's imagery produces a complex rhetorical succession in which the role of the reader in establishing the relationship between the juxtaposed images is fundamental. In perfect alignment with Marinetti, Šeršenevič places at the centre of his poetics of prose the transition from metaphor to analogy.

The last of the three prose writings of the almanac is Lev Zak's *Princess Cuttlefish*. This is the most accomplished of the three pieces. Several features immediately stand out that make this writing different from Šeršenevič's two excerpts. Markov was the first scholar to highlight that Zak's story is written in a completely different style.<sup>67</sup> The Italian influences are evident in Šeršenevič's two excerpts, but Zak's writing is an authentic experiment in prose, and it is actually much closer to the theoretical proposals of Šeršenevič's *Open Letter*. In *Princess Cuttlefish*, the sentences are longer, and the predominant syntactical expression is hypotaxis. This makes for a slower, less cadenced rhythm that both underlines Zak's use of a more traditional structure and facilitates the reader's understanding of the shifts between the different narrative layers. This diverse style was noticed as soon as the story was published,<sup>68</sup> and it was also highlighted by Markov, who described the

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<sup>66</sup> The hiatus between the first French editions of *Mafarka the Futurist* (1909) and *The Battle of Tripoli* (1912) and their Russian translations could lead one to conclude that Šeršenevič's theoretical reflections on prose developed on the basis of Potebnja's theory of the word and of Marinetti's statements (not the prose). However, if we consider that – as a number of studies and biographical materials report – Šeršenevič had profound knowledge of Italian Futurist works even before the publication of *Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, we can rightfully assume that he almost certainly knew the prose fragments that Marinetti quoted in the 1912 French version of the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k70679b/f5.item>, dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1912). For further evidence see CESARE G. DE MICHELIS, *Il futurismo italiano in Russia 1909-1929*, cit., p. 28; VLADIMIR P. LAPŠIN, *Marinetti e la Russia*, cit., p. 68; Livšic, Benedikt, *Polutoraglaznyj strelec*, cit., p. 375; VLADIMIR POLJAKOV, *Knigi russkogo kubofuturizma*, Moskva, Gileja, 1998, p. 153.

<sup>67</sup> See VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism. A History*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>68</sup> It is worth recalling Šeršenevič's footnote commentary, mentioned earlier in this paper.

tone of Zak's prose as characterised by «emotional, even hysterical inflections».<sup>69</sup>

Above, I called *Princess Cuttlefish* a short story because of its brevity. Yet, proper consideration of its structure suggests that such definitions as “multi-layered story” or “multi-perspective story” are more appropriate. Even its subtitle (*Razskaz*) indicates this. The term *Razskaz* is a play on the etymology of *rasskaz* [story, tale]. The prefix *raz-* hints to the multiple, dif-

ferent planes that compose the prose work.<sup>70</sup> As mentioned above, Zak's primary interest besides literature was painting.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, he was probably well-acquainted with the avant-garde tendencies coming from the West, especially with Cubism and how it inspired many of his literary rivals. Therefore, Livšić' *People in a Landscape*<sup>72</sup> may have also influenced him; after all, the main commitment of the Gileja group was to apply the principles of pictorial composition to verbal art. In fact, Livšić openly admitted that he was modelling his verbal material after Cubist structural principles by resorting to an unusual disposition of adverbs and prepositions to achieve the shifting of visual perspectives and confer hectic dynamicity to his “mute prose”.<sup>73</sup> However, in Zak's case, the “debt” to painting appears implicit or indirect.

I should specify that, despite their divergences, there are several common traits between the samples provided by Zak and Šeršenevič. All of them are plotless and their main features are formal research, use of imagery, and the capacity to spark conflicting impressions in the reader's mind. Zak describes the protagonist of his story as an old repellent lady who roams the city at night. She is infatuated with a baritone (referred to as N.N.). She watches him every evening from a window while she stands on the seventeenth step of a ladder that she always carries in her pocket. The writing style in which Zak depicts these events aligns especially with Šeršenevič's proposals on the centrality of visuality. We witness this fact from the very beginning of the story:

«Княжна Каракатицева принадлежала к той серии неряшливых старух, которые с закатом солнца оцепляют город и в сумерках сосредоточенно и осмысленно снимают с левой ноги башмак [...]».<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism. A History*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>70</sup> *Razskaz* is equivalent to *rasskaz*, and its literary use predates the adoption of the 1917 orthographic reforms.

<sup>71</sup> Right after the publication of the *Crematorium of Common Sense*, Zak abandoned literature and devoted his life to painting. See VLADIMIR MARKOV, *Russian Futurism. A History*, cit., p. 116; ANDREJ KRUSANOV, *Russkij avangard 1907-1932*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>72</sup> The stylistic features that characterise Livšić's brief work of prose are presented in detail in ADRIAN WANNER, *Russian Minimalism*, cit., p. 110-114.

<sup>73</sup> See BENEDIKT LIVŠIĆ, *Polutoraglazjy strelec*, cit., p. 339.

<sup>74</sup> [«Princess Cuttlefish belonged to that genre of scruffy old women that enclose the city when the sun sets and, at dusk, take their shoe off the left foot, carefully and thoughtfully [...]»], *Krematorij*, 1913, p. 27.

This imagery shares common traits with Šeršenevič's images: the urban and technological motifs, although less preponderant and more subtle here, are still the main source of inspiration. And they mostly serve as a colourful background that allows the narrative layers to merge and the sequence of images to flow without interruptions:

«Пока город белится, встает на дыбы, ржет, топокопытит, и все с такой фешенебельной деловитостью, княжна, должно быть, перемывает свои баночки. Но когда вечер обуздает его и черная амазонка, закулив свои дуговые и газовые фонари, сядет на дамское седло, старуха Каракатицева вылезает из бедной дырочки и, не делая никаких книксенов, перебирает тротуар».<sup>75</sup>

Another important element is the role of the narrating voice. We hear the voice of the narrator's *persona* in sudden shifts of narrative planes. Zak seems to be trying to break the fourth wall by inserting apparently casual observations in the middle of purely visual passages. He uses parentheses to emphasise his implicit addresses to the reader and involve him or her even more. This becomes particularly evident in the following passages, where hypotactic and paratactic structures begin to alternate,

«Их жалко, но мне отвратительно смотреть на них [...]. Чорт ее знает, по каким она ютится мышеловкам, но ни я, ни Арзарумочка никогда не встречали ее (Каракатицеву) днем»<sup>76</sup>

and where Zak includes several scattered hints at advertising indicated in quotation marks:

«А черная амазонка гордо сидит на смирном теперь коне и на ея вуали горят электрические рекламы – там выскакивает: “эротика”, а потом “здесь продается вдохновение молодым поэтам”, потом “Бальзамулин, лучшее средство против бессилья” и еще многое другое».<sup>77</sup>

These markers act as quasi-deictics and establish a concrete connection to contemporary extralinguistic influences. Zak compares neon lights to the star of the Milky Way: «Если же всмотреться, то это вовсе не вуаль, а самый

<sup>75</sup> [«When the city becomes white, rears, neighs, paws the ground, all with a trendy efficiency, the Princess perhaps washes her tin cans. But when the night curbs the city, and the black amazon has begun smoking her arc gas-lamps sitting side-saddle, the old Princess Cuttlefish comes out of a hole and, without curtseys, browses the pavement»], *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> [«The black Amazon sits proudly on her horse, now quiet, and on her veil electric signs sparkle, popping out: “eroticism”, and then “young poets can find inspiration here”, then “*Bal'zamulin*, the best remedy for fatigue”, and many more»], *ibid.*, p. 28.

обыкновенный млечный путь».<sup>78</sup> The use of neon lights was becoming popular in advertising at the beginning of 1910s in Western Europe. Therefore, Zak's comparison may have been perceived as a sign of a feasible future or simply as an immediate representation of embodied Futurism. But by defining the Milky Way as "usual", Zak was probably describing scenarios that would occur in a "perfect future", and thus showing a kind of futuristic sensibility that we can acknowledge amongst Italian Futurists as well.

Throughout the story, Zak continuously plays with the subversion of different planes of imagery: the city, the night, the old untidy woman, the amazon, the universe. All these images are juxtaposed mostly by collocation in different sentences and so should be understood in the broader perspective of the entire text. This once again distances his work from Šeršenevič's experiments, as Šeršenevič subjected his figures of speech to a more complex and multi-layered rhetorical construction.

After a brief digression on the love affair between Princess Cuttlefish and the baritone, the *razskaz* ends with a sudden mention of the Princess' death and with the crude depiction of her corpse lying on the sidewalk.<sup>79</sup> With an unexpected and abrupt change of scene, the narrating voice speaks once again, describing a romantic walk with his beloved (Arzarumočka). He mentions unimportant details to enhance the estrangement effect<sup>80</sup>, and he appeals to the reader and comments on the macabre scene he just witnessed: «Я высунул подальше язык и увидел [...] Это было ужасно!».<sup>81</sup>

With the synaesthesia at the beginning of this passage, Zak juxtaposes taste to sight, recalling the gastronomical metaphors used by Šeršenevič. The story ends with the authorial *persona* covering the street and the corpse with a handkerchief to prevent his beloved from seeing the dreadful scene as they pass by. There is something interesting here, structurally. This ending may seem puzzling given the Mezzanine's aesthetic insistence on the centrality of imagery. Yet, the great innovation in Zak's prose lies precisely in the untold; that is, in the very act of concealing and skating over the final scene. Here, the fourth wall is broken again. The reader is forced to fill in the missing elements.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The present study is one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine how Futurist aesthetics is reflected in the writing of experimental prose. Although it considers only a small sample of texts, its findings suggest the necessity to re-evaluate the role of prose in the development of Russian and Italian Fu-

<sup>78</sup> [«If one takes a good look at it, one realises that it is not a veil at all, but the usual Milky Way»], *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> «[...] лестница лежала на мостовой и около труп разбившейся княжны Каракатицовой, осколки пузырька и коробка из-под гуталина» [«[...] the ladder was lied on the road, and next to the corpse of the shattering Princess Cuttlefish there were fragments of a vial and an empty can of shoe polish»], *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> «[...] я нежно щекотал Арзарумочку за ухом и под мышкой», [«I tickled Arzarumočka's ear and armpit»], *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> [«I put out my tongue and saw [...] It was horrible!»], *ibid.*

turist literature. In this sense, particular attention should be granted to the sub-sets of Russian Futurism whose aesthetics are very diverse.

Many Russian Futurist authors took on prose writing, but this paper focused on the Mezzanine of Poetry because this is the only group that attempted to create futurist prose *and* to develop it theoretically—and also because this is the group that never repudiated the aesthetic principles of Italian Futurism. Accordingly, both Šeršenevič and Zak show Italian influences in their fictive and non-fictive prose works. Of course, these influences manifest themselves on different levels and – as I have underlined – are more evident in Šeršenevič’s writings. The main common element between Marinetti’s fictive prose and the Mezzanine experiments is something as simple as the centrality of the reader’s response:<sup>82</sup> undoubtedly inspired by Marinetti’s manifesto tirades, Šeršenevič and Zak aim their rhetorical constructions to the creation of the readers’ most active involvement. They want to force their readers to untangle their networks of images. Their final goal is to affect the readers themselves.

In the direct textual analysis above, we have seen how Marinetti influenced even the more technical and concrete aspects of the prose works of Šeršenevič and Zak, especially in structure and in vividness of imagery. The interchange of paratactic and hypotactic syntactical arrangements, on the one hand, is a clear indicator of the manifesto’s stylistic influence on fictive prose<sup>83</sup>, and on the other hand, it marks the inevitability of a clear detachment from pre-existing forms.

Thus, the prose of the poets of the Mezzanine shares with Italian Futurist prose both these structural traits: the mixing of narrative layers and the rhythmic arrangement. The Russian poets may have derived these features directly from the Italians. Šeršenevič’s style seems to rely very heavily on Marinetti’s arguments on Futurist prose as stated in the 1912 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*. In fact, Šeršenevič took a lot from Italian Futurism both structurally and thematically, while Zak’s work presents only some common elements of minor relevance and therefore proves to be a more genuine attempt to develop a new kind of authentic Russian experimental prose.

Finally, this study has been exploratory, but it nonetheless offers some insights for establishing the first steps of a new theoretical method for a future analysis of Futurist prose. Too often we take for granted that Italian and Russian Futurist prose writers have developed their style independently because of the quarrels that so heavily conditioned literary Futurism ever since the beginning of the 1910s. And yet this new comparative approach may allow us to expand our understanding of Futurist prose as a transnational phenomenon.

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<sup>82</sup> Besides a quasi-litotes present in the seventh section of the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* that has been cited earlier in this paper, it shall be noted that in the manifestoes there is almost no explicit reference to the importance of the reader’s response in Italian Futurist literature, but some elements can be found in other sources. In *A Response to Objections* (August 1912), Marinetti replies to the detractors of the proposals presented in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, and in detail dwells on the reason why he advocates the suppression of adjectives and adverbs. Here, Marinetti hints at the fact that the reader’s involvement plays a pivotal role in his poetics: «the reader’s spirit must momentarily hold its breath and tremble, beg to be calmed, until at last it can breathe freely again when the wave of words falls back [...]», FILIPPO T. MARINETTI, *A Response to Objections*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>83</sup> And on other genres of non-fiction as well, such as essays and theoretical writings.

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### PAROLE CHIAVE

Futurismo russo; Marinetti; Šeršenevič; Zak



### NOTIZIE DELL'AUTORE

Luca Cortesi ha di recente conseguito un dottorato di ricerca presso il Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati dell'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, con una tesi dedicata allo studio della *nechudožestvennaja proza* di V. Chlebnikov. Attualmente è cultore della materia di Letteratura russa presso il medesimo Ateneo. I suoi interessi di ricerca vertono principalmente sulla letteratura russa e russo-sovietica del primo Novecento, con particolare attenzione alla prosa d'avanguardia.

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