The Breathing of "The Sick Pilot":

Cesare Pavese and Italian Futurism

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on an analysis of the representation of the body and of technologies in "The Sick Pilot," one of Cesare Pavese's early short stories, and explores both its affinities and differences with Italian Futurism. Although Pavese never joined in Italian Futurism or in any other historical avant-garde movement, he was strongly interested in transformations brought about by modern technologies and did feel a strong need to renovate the Italian literary language in order to express a radically transformed reality. By means of an analysis of futurist themes in his short story "The Sick Pilot (*Il pilota malato*)," I hope to to shed a light on Pavese's strong interest in modernity, as well as on the complex Italian cultural situation in the late 1920s, a situation that cannot be reduced to a dichotomy between "futurists" and "traditionalists."

2. "The Trilogy of Machines"

"The Sick Pilot" was written in 1928, when Pavese was 20 years old. It is one of three stories in his "The Trilogy of Machines (*La trilogia delle macchine*)," each of which was produced in the same year. The other two were "The Failed Adventurer (*L'avventuriero fallito*)" and "The Bad Mechanic (*Il cattivo meccanico*)." The trilogy stories present such examples of modern technology as cinema, factories, cars, airplanes, and city electrification, and they exhibit significant affinities with the aesthetics of Italian Futurism. Pavese himself apparently did not highly value the works,

however, and never published them himself. The trilogy was first published only in 1993, in a collection of his early short stories[1].

Perhaps because it remained unpublished for such a long time, the trilogy is not well known, and there are very few studies on it. Its affinities with Italian Futurism have been noted by some critics[2], but those affinities have yet to be sufficiently explored. All three stories offer vivid descriptions of physical sensations related to experiences with new technologies, and I believe that the three are worthy of greater interest and attention, especially in regard to the representations of bodies and technologies. In this paper, though, I will focus my attention on the representation of the body and technologies in only "The Sick Pilot," which presents three main examples of modern technology: the airplane, the car, and the expanding use of electricity.

3. Airplanes: fusion between bodies and machines

The story begins with physical description of its protagonist, a successful acrobatic pilot named Rafter.

> Rafter seemed as if he had been made to accompany the precise and sinewy form of an airplane. In the sky, with a severe jacket and helmet; on the ground, with the agility of his thin body and the promptness in the metallic look of his eyes[3].

Here we can note that the body of the protagonist is identified with the body of an airplane. While the airplane is personified with the expression "sinewy," which is usually used to describe a muscular human body, the expression "metallic" used to describe his eyes is machine-like. Such

[1] Cesare Pavese, *Lotte di giovani e altri racconti*, ed. Mariarosa Masoero (Torino: Einaudi, 1993).
[2] Mariarosa Masoero, introduction to *Lotte di giovani e altri racconti*, XII; Marziano Guglielminetti, introduction to *Tutti i racconti*, by Cesare Pavese (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), XXXV-XXXIX; Alberto Bianchi, "Tre vite una sola morte. *La trilogia delle macchine* di Cesare Pavese," *Il lettore di provincia* 108/109 (August-December 2000): 12-25.
[3] Cesare Pavese, *Tutti i racconti*, ed. Mariarosa Masoero (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 271. The English translations of all the quotes from "The Sick Pilot" in this paper are mine.

association of human body and machine can be found also in a number of later descriptions of his flying. The following quote is one of them.

> […] high up, he breathed the atmosphere, piloted his partner, and listened carefully to the metallic voice that, with an imperceptible change of rhythm, informed him of every need[4].

In this passage, the airplane is again personified, this time with the expression "partner." To be more precise, the word used in the original Italian text is *compagna*, which indicates a "female" partner. Another expression that contributes to the personification is "metallic voice": noise from the airplane is described as the "voice" of a woman. We can also note that acoustic features of the airplane are emphasized. Not only in this passage but also in a number of other passages, flight is described with special attention to its acoustic features. Another thing that I should add here is that the act of "breathing" is emphasized not only in this passage but also in many others: in this story, flight is repeatedly associated with the act of breathing.

I would also like to note that the relationship between human being and airplane is not described as one-sided human dominance but, rather, appears as a complex interactive relationship. In the passage that I have just quoted, the pilot seems to have total control over the airplane, but at the same time he is also serving the airplane: he carefully listens to her voice and tries to satisfy all her needs. In the next passage he even gives over complete control to the airplane.

> Sometimes he abandoned himself to the joy of leaving the flight all to the machine, and then there were long dizzying slides, like embraces, turns, climbs, roars, pauses for a moment on the bed of a cloud and then contortions, again, without end[5].

[4] *Ibid*., 273.
[5] *Ibid.*

Here the airplane appears again as a woman, and, beginning with the word "embraces," the physical pleasure of acrobatic flight is described in terms clearly suggesting the physical act of making love, and the acoustic element is emphasized with the expression "roars."

Flight, in this story, appears not only as a physical pleasure but also as a physical addiction. In the next passage that I quote, Pavese uses the metaphor of a "cigarette."

> The engine was as necessary for him as a cigarette for a smoker. He felt at ease only when he was, half buried in his compartment, pulling up, with a strong wrist as a lever, the whole fragile skeleton of linen and steel[6].

Here flight is associated to a sense of ease rather than excitement. The protagonist interestingly feels at ease only when he is inside the fragile skeleton, up in the air, which is usually not considered the safest situation. Also, here the protagonist's body is described like a part of a machine: his wrist is associated with the lever. What pulls the whole airplane up is actually the engine and the lever, and not his wrist, but he feels as if his own "strong wrist" is pulling up the airplane. What makes him feel at ease may, in fact, be the feeling of unity with the machine.

In the next passage that I quote, the feeling of unity is described more clearly, in greater detail:

> Rafter performed himself all the airplane's movements: he was rudder, propeller, screw, magnet, burst, and the engine did nothing but multiply a hundredfold the power of his muscles.
>
> In that summer of training, thus, his whole effort was to make himself more and more machine-like, precise, until his pulse was beating with the rhythm of the powerful new engine[7].

In this passage we can see the complete fusion of the protagonist's body and the airplane. The pilot feels as if his body is connected to all the parts of the airplane and his power is multiplied by

[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid*., 274.

the machine. The relationship between the airplane and the pilot is interactive. The pilot's body is unified with the airplane not just because he is controlling the machine but also because he is trying, as well, to synchronize his body to the machine. I have been unable to find any biographical data indicating that Pavese had ever experienced flight at the time of the writing, and I assume that these vivid descriptions are based not on his own experience but rather on his knowledge and imagination.

As is well-known, the airplane is one of the recurrent and central themes in Italian Futurism. It is featured in a number of futurist manifestos and writings. Italian Futurists featured airplanes in a variety of fields, creating aero-poetry, aero-painting, and aero-dance, aero-sculpture, aero-ceramics[8]. Marinetti, the leader of Italian Futurism, regarded the airplane as a new technology that radically changed human sensibility. In "Destruction of Syntax—Radio Imagination—Words-in-Freedom," he wrote:

> Futurism is based on the complete renewal of human sensibility that has occurred as an effect of science's major discoveries. Those people who today make use of the telegraph, the telephone, the gramophone, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the dirigible, the airplane, the cinema, the great newspaper (the synthesis of a day in the world's life) are not aware of the decisive influence that these various forms of communication, transportation, and information have on their psyches[9].

Marinetti's urge to renew arts and literature derives from this acute perception of the radical changes created by new technologies and his desire to express them. Also, in the "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," Marinetti mentions the airplane. To explain how and when he felt the need to renew literature, he describes his physical sensation during flight: "Sitting astride the

[8] For the representations of airplanes and human bodies by Italian Futurists, see Sayaka Yokota, *La danza nel futurismo: Giannina Censi e la danza moderna*, a dissertation for dual doctoral degree submitted to the University of Bologna and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in 2013.

[9] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Radio Imagination—Words-in-Freedom," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lowrence Rainey et al. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 143.

fuel tank of an airplane, my stomach warmed by the aviator's head, I felt the ridiculous inanity of the old syntax inherited from Homer[10].” This passage suggests that Marinetti perceived those changes not just theoretically, but more as physical sensations. Also, here we can see the personification of the airplane: the airplane is referred to as an “aviator” and its engine as the aviator's “head.” We may also note the feeling of the unity with the airplane expressed as the transmission of warmth. The airplane described here shows its power to affect human body and mind. In this manifesto, Marinetti also shows his strong interest in the acoustic features of machines. Declaring the need to emphasize three elements—noise, weight, and smell— he writes: “Listen to engines and reproduce their speech[11].”

In “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine” Marinetti more clearly describes the feeling of fusion between human bodies and machines, using the concept of the “multiplied man”.

In this essay, he first mentions a French rail worker strike and explains that none of the mechanics sabotaged a locomotive because for them it was like a “great girlfriend, faithful and devoted[12].” Referring to this episode, he explains how machines are radically transforming human perception and corporeality:

> […] we must prepare for the imminent and inevitable identification of man and motor, facilitating and perfecting a continual interchange of intuitions, rhythms, instincts, and metallic disciplines […] We believe in the possibility of an incalculable number of human transformations, and we declare without a smile that wings are waiting to be awakened within the flesh of man[13].

Such a feeling of fusion between machine and human body is a recurrent subject also in futurist paintings. For example, in the painting “Sensation of Flight (*Sensazione in volo*),” by Augusto Favalli, the human body is depicted as being metallic. In addition to the eyes, parts of the

[10] Marinetti, “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature,” in *Futurism: An Anthology*, 199.
[11] *Ibid*., 123.
[12] Marinetti, “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine,” in *Futurism: An Anthology*, 90.
[13] *Ibid*.

respiratory system are also painted in the same color as the surroundings, as if to suggest the feeling of fusion of body, machine, and the sky through the act of breathing. The sensation of flight represented here is similar to that described by Pavese in "The Sick Pilot."

4. Cars and the electrified city

Next I would like to focus my attention on descriptions of cars and of the effects of city electrification in "The Sick Pilot."

In the middle of the story, a doctor tells the protagonist that he exhibits "certain indispositions of respiration" and orders him to take a break from his work as a pilot. Rafter, prohibited from flying, discovers the pleasure of driving cars.

> Discovering the whole wide horizon of the surrounding plains, he felt as if he were again in flight and he closed his eyes, trying to increase the illusion in the vertigo of a car.
>
> Flying, flying, it was his breathing.
>
> He wished that the drive would become always more dizzying and fast, for it already to be evening and for him to have come back, […], in the city and forgetting time, in a childlike amusement[14].

In this passage, in which the protagonist enjoys driving a car as a substitute for flight, we can see that he is addicted to the sensations of speed and vertigo. Here again, the act of "breathing" is associated with flight.

I would also like to add here that Pavese's writing style exhibits features that differ from traditional norms of Italian narratives. Not only in this passage but also in many other parts of "The Trilogy of Machines," we can find very short sentences and paragraphs, as well as the repetition of individual words, as in "Flying, flying" Pavese's writing style is, of course, very far from the typical

[14] Pavese, *Tutti i racconti*, 275.

writing style of Italian Futurists, which was characterized by the destruction of traditional syntax, frequent use of onomatopoeia, and graphic experimentations. It is also true, however, that Pavese's writing style in this story exhibits certain experimental aspects.

Along with the pleasure of driving, the protagonist also discovers the pleasure of enjoying the dynamic beauty of an electrified city at night: this also becomes a substitute for flight, and he gets addicted to it.

> […] he liked the nightlife and only for it did he endure inaction.
>
> In fact, a city is not a city if not at night.
>
> […] At night, every provincialism, every rural element, disappears into the darkness, and the great city is already nothing but a mysterious sequence of dark and very tall masses, geometrized by bright eyes and split in straight lines where streams of light stretch. In the squares, inside the light fog, which is like the breath of a city, very clear multicolored constellations cross each other, screaming of their splendor[15].

In this passage the city is represented in an abstract and geometric way, as in Italian Futurist paintings: details disappear in the darkness of night, and the city appears as a mysterious sequence of masses punctuated by dots and lines of electric light. Here Pavese describes the electrified city as if it were a person or an animal, using expressions like "bright eyes," "breath," and "screaming." We can also note that the expression "screaming of their splendor" is synesthesia: the description of the city is completely visual, but it also gives certain acoustic sensations as well.

Cars and electric lights are, of course, recurrent and central themes in Italian Futurism. In his famous "Manifesto of Futurism," Marinetti wrote that "a racing car" is more beautiful than "the *Victory of Samothrace*[16]." Regarding electricity and the cityscape, he wrote "we shall sing the

[15] *Ibid*.
[16] Marinetti, "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, 51.

multicolored and polyphonic tidal waves of revolution in the modern metropolis; shall sing the vibrating nocturnal fervor of factories and shipyards burning under violent electrical moons[17]".

5. The illness of the pilot

As we can see from these comparative examples, the representations of the body and technologies in "The Sick Pilot" do exhibit significant affinities with the aesthetics of Italian Futurism, but when the protagonist's physical condition deteriorates, we can also find a number of descriptions that exhibit a kind of sensibility which largely differs from that of Italian Futurism.

In the latter part of the story, the addiction to driving and nightlife ironically contributes to the protagonist's physical deterioration:

> The cold wind of the rural areas and the night fog affected him in the way that the doctors had feared flight would. He experienced coughing when breathing and pain in the ribs. […] And the fever never left him. He got also headaches. He almost never slept anymore[18].

This passage is in sharp contrast to the descriptions of the body in those previous passages that are filled with vitality, power, pleasure, ease, and smooth breathing.

Later in the story, he tries to fly an airplane again, but the experience of flying no longer invigorates him as it had before; rather, the high altitude air and the noises of the airplane result in coughing fits and migraine headaches. He is now able to enjoy neither airplanes, cars, nor nightlife. In the hopes of a physical recovery, he moves to the hills to rest up in the clean air, but it is already too late, and his condition simply deteriorates. Although flying was the main cause of his illness, he continues to try to find, in this new environment, a way to feel as if he were flying an airplane.

[17] *Ibid*.
[18] Pavese, *Tutti i racconti*, 276.

Often, in August mornings, between the golden hum of myriads of insects, he distinguished the distant roar of an engine and then the bursting sound of an airplane that passed in sun glitters over the valley, and he shivered and bent down his thin face between his hands. He took in breaths breaths, deluding himself by tightening his eyes[19].

Acoustic elements are also emphasized in this passage. Focusing his attention on the distant sound of an airplane and imagining himself in the airplane, he tries to evoke all the physical sensations of flight and breathing. The unusual repetition of the word "breaths" here emphasizes the act of breathing and its association with the experience of flight.

This ironic description of the pilot's corporeality, as well as the painful description that I quoted previously, shows Pavese's ambivalent sensibility toward new technologies and their impact on human beings, a sensibility that differs significantly from that of Italian Futurists, which was characterized by strongly positive view of machines. In "The Sick Pilot," Pavese expresses not only positive feelings and sensations regarding machines, such as vitality, pleasure, and excitement, but also negative feelings and sensations, such as pain, fear, and anxiety.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the representations of the body and of machines in this short story show a number of significant affinities with futurist aesthetics, but also show Pavese's ambivalent view of machines, one which differs from strongly positive futurist view. This difference, I think, may have been one of the factors that kept Pavese from joining in Futurism as a movement. Referring to Italian Futurists, in a letter to a former high school teacher in 1928, he wrote: "I don't understand them. They are too healthy[20]." Another important difference from Italian Futurism is, of course, in his writing style: Pavese's writing style does exhibit certain linguistic experimentation, but it is quite different from the strongly experimental writing style of Italian Futurism. I believe that in this

[19] *Ibid*., 278-279.
[20] Pavese, *Lettere 1924-1944*, ed. Lorenzo Mondo (Torino: Einaudi, 1966), 104.

short story, a young Pavese tried using a new writing style to describe a world in radical transformation—but not exactly in the same way that futurists did.

In this regard, we should note that, around the same period of time, he became strongly interested in elements of American culture, particularly jazz, movies, and literature. In high school, he was already an admirer of the American poet Walt Whitman, and, in the 1930s, he dedicated himself to the translation of works by such modernist American writers as Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner. Pavese's inclination toward futurist themes and that toward American culture during the same period might seem incongruous, but I think it is possible to find connections and convergences, if we interpret them in the light of Pavese's modernist sensibility. For example, it is important to remember in this regard that Whitman, whom Pavese so admired, was also admired by Marinetti and has been identified as one of the forerunners of his aesthetics[21]. I think that Pavese's inclination toward futurist themes and that toward American culture both reflect his acute perception of a world in radical transformation, as well as his strong desire to express that perception in a meaningful way.

[21] See Marinetti, "We Adjure Our Symbolist Masters," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, 95.