"LONG LIVE FUTURIST PRAGUE!"[1]

David Vichnar

The article challenges the widespread notion, repeated in much literary history, regarding the non-existence or irrelevance of Czech Futurism. It traces the reception of Marinetti's manifestoes through the pre-war and post-WWI context of Prague avant-garde, culminating in the Futurist leader's triumphant visit to the city in 1921. It discusses the careers of S.K. Neumann, Otakar Theer, and Růžena Zátková, three important Futurist figures on the native avant-garde scene. It analyses selected mid-20s works by two most prominent Devětsil members, Vítězslav Nezval and Jaroslav Seifert, and brings into relief their Futurist poetics. Critiquing, in conclusion, Karel Teige's anxiety of influence vis-à-vis the movement, the article shows that Futurism formed the very core of avant-garde theory and practice in 1910s and 1920s Bohemia.

A hundred-and-ten years after its birth, Futurism still remains an impoverished chapter in the rich history of Prague's international avant-garde, for reasons both general and endemic. The former would include the dubious light the ravages of WWI cast upon the Futurist adoration of war as hygiene, its much criticised if also ill-understood alignment with Fascism later on, etc. The latter would have to do with the brief and problematic flourishing of pre-war Czech avant-garde, the tortuous career paths of its most dedicated sympathisers and practitioners, and not least its post-WWI doctrinaire developments. Immediately after the war, Futurism found itself supplanted, suppressed, if also absorbed by the 1920-established Devětsil group and its Poetist hardliners.

[1] This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund-Project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World" (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

Consequently, the literary historical consensus in the native avant-garde scholarship regarding the topic of "Czech Futurism" has been akin to astronomers' response to the question of life on Mars: most claim that there is none, some avow that there might be some, and only very few suggest that there might be plenty of it, provided the concept in question is redefined. Kateřina Hloušková, author of the only Czech book-length "Baedeker" of Italian and Russian Futurism, has provided the following bleak summary:

> For many decades we have been used to repeating that in no shape or form did Futurism settle in this country, that its selective reception came only with noticeable delay, that 1900s Bohemia was artistically oriented exclusively towards France, and that Czech modernist painters unequivocally preferred Cubism. Italian Futurism has been viewed as too loud a bubble, which kept nearing Fascism until it merged into one with it and ended up sharing its fate of condemnation and repudiation. It has been opined that Czech art life remained untouched by Futurism, that Czech avant-garde had exclusively leftist ideological background and that Futurist inspiration, always smacking of extreme right-wing Fascism, *de facto* did not exist.[2]

In this respect, probes into art history have so far yielded more results regarding Czech Futurism than those into letters: František Šmejkal's pioneering 1988 essay on "Futurism and Czech Art," as well as the work of Mahulena Nešlehová,[3] have mapped the fine arts' response to Futurism in the work of Otto Gutfreund, Bohumil Kubišta, Antonín Procházka, and other prominent 1910s art figures. Their research has convincingly shown that Futurism in Bohemia had influenced two generations of artists – the pre-war modernists and the Devětsil generation of the 1920s – soliciting in each of which a response different in both degree and kind.

Despite these efforts, twenty years after, Lenka Janská's broadly-conceived and internationally focused *Mezi obrazem a textem* (Between the Image and the Text, 2007) still points to the insufficiently mapped roots of Czech pre-war avant-

[2] Kateřina Hloušková, *F.T.M. = Futurismus: malý bedekr futuristické avantgardy* (Prague: Barrister & Principal, 2019) 169. Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Czech in this article are mine.

[3] Cf. František Šmejkal, "Futurismus a české umění," *Umění*, 36.1 (1988): 20-53. Mahulena Nešlehová, "Futurismus a české výtvarné umění 10. let," *Ateliér*, 7.26 (1994): 9; Mahulena Nešlehová, "Impulses of Futurism and Czech Art," *International Futurism in Arts and Literature,* ed. Günter Berghaus (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000) 122-43.

gardism, bewailing how "Futurism's influence on the Czech fine arts has largely remained outside scholarly interest."[4] Similar conclusions are reached in the work of Germanist Jiří Stromšík, writing on the reception of European modernism in the Czech avantgarde, who suggests that "on the whole Marinetti's Futurism left traces in Poetism deeper than is usually acknowledged."[5]

Even so, reports pointing to inadequate (and at times unjust) evaluations of the Futurist contribution to the forming of Czech literary avant-garde are rather unique. Thus, any overview of critical work comes across a bizarre occurrence: Futurism in Czech letters is by and large only dealt with in accounts from other philologies (and of primarily comparative focus)[6] or from abroad: to this day, the only book-length account of "Futurism in the Czech literary landscape" has been penned by Ilona Gwóźdź-Szewczenko and, to date, exists only in the Polish original.[7] Gwóźdź-Szewczenko even speaks of "the hidden face of Czech Futurism," attributing this odd phenomenon to "the dogma in the Czech literary history that there was never any Futurism in Czech literature."[8]

1.

In all these traits, the history of Futurism in a "Czech" avant-garde context seems to run parallel to another one of its obscured chapters, Prague Dada. This despite the fact that critical reception of "Italian" Futurism was timely and wherever serious, it was generally positive; that creative reception followed quickly in its wake, its epigonal beginnings followed by some original offshoots; and that Italian Futurists exhibited and performed in Prague in 1921 (i.e., around the time of Huelsenbeck, Haussman, and Schwitters' visits), with multitudes in attendance and enthusiastic reports.

In October 1921, Enrico Prampolini organised the "Modern Italian Art Exhibition" at Prague's Rudolfinum Gallery, with the aim of popularising the

4 Lenka Janská, *Mezi obrazem a textem. Text a grafém v evropském a českém malířství 1910-1930* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 2007) 9.

5 Jiří Stromšík, "Recepce evropské moderny v české avantgardě," *Svět literatury*, 23-24 (2002): 48.

6 Cf. Danuše Kšicová, *Od moderny k avantgardě. Rusko-české paralely* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2007).

7 Cf. Ilona Gwóźdź-Szewczenko, *Futuryzm w czeskim pejzażu literackim* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2009).

8 Ilona Gwóźdź-Szewczenko, "Skrytá tvář futurismu v Čechách," *Česká literatura: rozhraní a okraje*, ed. Lenka Jungmannová (Prague: Akropolis, 2010) 91.

movement within the theatre and stage design. This he achieved by forming lasting partnerships with Bedřich Feuerstein and Jiří Frejka (who went on to found, in 1925, the Osvobozené divadlo – Liberated Theatre, followed by the Divadlo Dada – Dada Theatre, in 1927). Marinetti arrived in Prague on 8 December and stayed for ten days, overseeing the premiere of his "theatrical syntheses" presented on the revolving stage of the Švandovo divadlo (Švanda theatre), accompanied by public talks and interventions. Here is Josef Kodíček's report for the *Tribuna* daily:

> He enters the stage as if it were his place of birth. And right away, there is contact. He casts around his notorious catchphrases against decadence, passéism, in favour of electrification, simultaneity, contemporaneity, anti-traditional art, like a caller in front of a fair stand. He is unstoppable. Like a prancing horse he dashes forward with such force and temperament that whatever the opposition might retort feels like chickens chirping; he vituperates and curses, adores and worships, gesticulates and runs, always with a surfeit of life.[9]

During his brief but intense visit, Marinetti met with all the prominent Devětsil representatives at their ringleader Karel Teige's flat, including among others Vítězslav Nezval, Jaroslav Seifert, and Konstantin Biebl, whose poetry would bear a Futurist stamp.

Following the success of the Švanda theatre performances, Jirka Macák's translation of *Words in Freedom* appeared as *Osvobozená slova* with a cover designed by Josef Čapek. Before 1922 was out, Prampolini managed to get Marinetti's *Fiery Drum* staged at the Stavovské divadlo (Estates Theatre) in December 1922, under the direction of Karel Dostál.[10] Starring in the show and praised by contemporary theatre critics was sculptor-turned-actor František Fiala, famous under the stage name Ferenc Futurista – a pseudonym he had adopted back in 1917 on the basis of Jindřich Vodák's theatre review dubbing him "the man of the future."[11] His acting style did give off "a truly 'Futurist' air: wild, eccentric, tending toward black humour, the grotesque, the absurd…"[12]

9 Josef Kodíček, "Marinetti v Praze," *Tribuna,* 15 December 1921: 3.

10 For more information, see Derek Sayer, *Prague: Capital of the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) esp. 56-58, and also Radka Divíšková's MA thesis "Wireless Imagination: Poetological Manifestos of F.T. Marinetti and Their Poetist Realisations" (unpublished, Prague 2019).

11 Cf. Radek Žitný and Jaromír Farník, *Drastický komik Ferenc Futurista* (Prague: XYZ, 2015) 23.

12 Stromšík 30.

Marinetti was not one to forget Prague's hospitality: when listing the other Futurist "capitals of the universe" besides Paris in his early-1923 *Manifesto of World Futurism*, he remembered to thank Prague for its "contribution":

> Au grand PARIS FUTURISTE qui de jour en jour change d'optique, les autres capitals d'univers aportent leur contribution: ROME, MILAN, NAPLES, […], LONDRES, […] BERLIN, […] MOSCOU, PÉTROGRAD, […] VARSOVIE, CRACOVIE, […] PRAGUE, avec Teige, Neumann, Feuerstein, Filla, Hoffmann, Spala, Kapek, Kreikar, Seifert, Muzika.[13]

The list, apart from the misspellings/mis-transcriptions of Špála's, Čapek's and Krejcar's names, is a veritable who-is-who of early-20s Czech avant-garde, including writers, painters, theatre-directors and theorists. Prague did not forget either: Marinetti's influence was to remain present all through the 1920s: in 1929, Devětsil's Osvobozené divadlo (Liberated Theatre) staged his *Captives* with sets designed by Jindřich Štyrský.

2.

This belated apotheosis of Futurism in Prague had been enabled by several processes and figures of the pre-war arts scene. Although primarily devoting itself to Expressionism and Cubism, Czech critical reception of Futurism set off immediately after the 1909 publication of the first of Marinetti's manifestos.

Not that Futurism was accepted without controversy (its very nature presupposed quite the opposite): the first report coming in June 1909 on the front page of *Národní listy* daily, penned by Václav Hladík and sardonically titled "New Messiah,"[14] was an attack both *ad hominem* and *ad rem.* This was followed by numerous ephemeral and piecemeal reports on current Futurist activities, of a decidedly sensational bent. Futurism became synonymous with the weird and the comic, a deformation of the movement's tenor giving rise to idiosyncratic paraphrases, for which Gwóźdź-Szewczenko has coined the term *ParaFuturism*.[15] A case in point is an unsigned article from 1912 in *Právo lidu* daily, reporting as follows:

> The Futurists are working in literature as well. They intend to suppress the adjective and the adverb as unnecessary burdens, thereby providing

[13] F.T. Marinetti, "Noi," *Le Futurisme mondial, nuova seria*, 6.9 (1923): 1-2.
[14] Václav Hladík, "Nový Mesiáš," *Národní listy*, 49.195 (17 June 1909): 1.
[15] Gwóźdź-Szewczenko, "Skrytá tvář futurismu v Čechách" 92.

> the noun with its full value. Instead, Futurism plans to use various signs […], making the Futurist novella look (according to a quote from F.T. Marinetti himself) thusly: "Battle of gravity + scent of noon ¾ the bellow of flute the glare of tumb tumb alarm…"[16]

Thus, Futurism was quick to arrive in Bohemia, soon to be absorbed by the artistic ferment of the early 1910s, yet its presence was specific and its interpretation giving rise to new literary-critical 'labels.' But soon the reception exceeded second-hand jibes, as Marinetti himself was given floor to present the theses of his programme in the modernist-decadent *Moderní revue*, which also brought out a review of his recently published *Words in Freedom.*

Crucial in making Futurism available in Czech in the first place (and giving Futurism its critical due in the second) were the Čapek brothers: as early as 1911, Josef Čapek penned the first serious and unprejudiced review of "The Position of Futurists in Contemporary Art" for *Umělecký měsíčník* (Arts Monthly), and in late 1912, he mentions in a letter to Jarmila Pospíšilová having read all of Marinetti's novels.[17] In mid-1913, Karel writes to Vlastislav Hofman about having "sent to Marinetti a copy of *Lumír* magazine including my translation of one of his poems; for which I have received his books with personal dedications and all the manifests the Futurists have published."[18] This he follows with a laudatory review of the exhibition of Futurist paintings that reached Prague in 1913 from Berlin.[19]

Together, the Čapek brothers began to form the "Cubo-Futurist" wing in the passionate debate filling the pages of *Umělecký měsíčník* in 1912-13, opposing the more broadly "modernist" wing represented by, e.g., Emil Filla and Vincenc Kramář. Here is Josef summarising the debate for *Lumír* magazine:

> Some Czech critics have developed the bad habit of condemning the Futurists just on account of their making great fuss and not much great art; it would seem they are to blame solely because we cannot borrow anything from them, and they have not come to our rescue. Those refusing and 'overcoming' Futurism tend to forget that this movement is none of our business but has a specific local import. […] They also forget

16 Anon., "O umělecké drobnosti," *Právo lidu*, 259 (1912): 7.

17 Quoted in Karel Krejčí, *Česká literatura a kulturní proudy evropské* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1975) 79.

18 Karel Čapek, *Korespondence 1*, Spisy Karla Čapka 22, ed. Marta Dandová (Prague: Český spisovatel, 1993) 115.

19 Karel Čapek, "Výstava maleb italských futuristů," *Česká revue*, 3 (1913-14): 191.

> that the Futurists have never claimed to be great artists; they are and want only to be demonstrators, proclaiming the provisionality and ephemerality of their work well before they have been accused thereof.[20]

As the Čapeks tirelessly emphasised, Futurism to them was less an art programme than a life-style movement; an evaluation of Futurism crucial for the formation of the pre-war – and prophetic of the developments in the post-war Czech avant-gardism.

3.

Influenced by the Čapek brothers' critical efforts was the most important Czech literary practitioner of Futurism, Stanislav Kostka Neumann, whose long literary career evolved through numerous phases: turn-of-the-century Anarchist and provocateur (public bigamist), mid-1910s Futurist and civilist, post-war Socialist and then Communist. Apart from his poetry collection *Nové zpěvy* (New Songs), Futurism is most evident in Neumann's series of feuilletons published in *Lidové noviny* between 1913 and 1914, collected after the war in *Ať žije život!* (Long Live Life!)

Clearly discernible within both are such typical Futurist themes and motifs as fascination with metropolitan life, admiration for technologies, interest in a new sensibility at once modern and positive, etc. Crucial for the Futurist reception in Bohemia is Neumann's feuilleton "Otevřená okna" (Open Windows) from 9 August 1913, considered by Šmejkal as a "Czech Futurist Manifesto."[21] Inspired equally by Marinetti's manifestoes and Apollinaire's *Futurist Anti-tradition* (explicitly mentioned as inspiration), Neumann's text departs from harsh criticism of the domestic art scene which "has been stinky and mouldy for a while now" – especially due to the majority's lack of originality and "belief in some eternal truths."[22] The eponymous "open windows" become metaphor for letting in the fresh air of Futurist stamina and internationalist sensibility, lacking in 1913 Prague:

> An open window to the world. Truly open. It is not necessary to let everything directly in through the door. But to see, hear, feel what is going on outside, this is always good. As long as we were catching up

[20] Josef Čapek, "Výstava futuristů," *Lumír*, 42 (1914): 140.

[21] Šmejkal 27.

[22] Stanislav Kostka Neumann, "Otevřená okna," *Ať žije život! Volné úvahy o novém umění* (Prague: Fr. Borový, 1920) 56.

> with Europe, we used to let things in gladly and swiftly. Today, when we have caught up with Europe, there is no reason why what is happening in Paris, London, Rome, and Berlin in 1913 cannot also take place in Prague in 1913.[23]

From this follows Neumann's attempt at implementing the Futurist programme in a local environment, calling on the reader to dig "healthy, predatory and ravenous Futurist teeth" into the "dear nation."[24] Neumann does not, however, call for unqualified or epigonal following, but a critical if gracious evaluation of the Futurist sensibility: "Let's not just listen to them dumbly agape. Let's laugh with them, shout with them, but then let's take our distance and reflect."[25] His iconoclasm stretches far enough to include Marinetti himself:

> Ahoy, lads, all aboard! If you like, throw Picasso and Marinetti out the door, we don't need them. We've had our fair share of jackanapes. Our windows stand open, through them we peer out, listen, smell, we've got all our five healthy senses with which to feel *directly* the categorical imperatives of modern-day clamour.[26]

Neumann concludes by ticking off one of the manifesto genre's staples and treating us to a long list of "What should perish" and "What should live." Here is a sampling of some of the most interesting items from either list:

> What should perish: the pleasing gravy of academicism and impressionism, folklore, Alfons Mucha, old-Prague sentimentality, *bestia whimperans*, the Art-Industrial Museum, the Vinohrady theatre! […] Literary-political criticism, historicism and moraline [sic], philologists, cults, boredom, Jewish Catholics, Kulturträgers, bourgeois charity and socialist sentimentality, positive politics, the Crimea and the Balkans! […] Feminism, haberdashery, female handiwork!
>
> What should live: the liberated word, fauvism, expressionism, cubism, pantheism, dramatism, orphism, paroxysm, dynamism, onomatopoetism

23 Neumann, "Otevřená okna" 56. Trans. and quoted in Nešlehová, "Impulses of Futurism and Czech Art," 125.
24 Neumann, "Otevřená okna" 67.
25 Neumann, "Otevřená okna" 63.
26 Neumann, "Otevřená okna" 66.

> [sic], the poetry of clamour, the civilisation of inventions and voyages of discovery! […] Machinism, the sportsground, the central abattoir, Laurin & Klement, the future cinematograph, the world exhibition, the railway station, art-advertisement, iron and concrete! […] Modernity, life flowing, and art civilised.

Concluding Neumann's manifesto is an alphabetical list of fellow modernists, as wide-ranging and inclusive as Marinetti's own:

> Long live: Vincenc Beneš, V. H. Brunner, Josef Čapek, Karel Čapek, Otokar Fischer, Otto Gutfreund, Jozef Gočár, Stanislav Hanuš, Vlastimil Hofman, Josef Chochol, Pavel Janák, Jos. Kodíček, Zdeněk Kratochvíl, B. Kubišta, Fr. Kysela, Fr. Langer, Stanislav K. Neumann, Otakar Theer, V. Špála, Wojkowicz et al.![27]

Though obviously referencing Marinetti's own *Futurist Manifesto* (including its iconoclasm and provocative misogyny), Neumann's concept of "art civilised" is important in describing his own version of tradition from which he views Futurism in this manifesto. "Civilism," his one-man movement Neumann based on his creative re-readings of Walt Whitman and Émile Verhaeren and their fascination with modern civilisation and technology with an emphasis on the viewpoint of working-class and proletarian political concerns.

In the avant-garde historian Štěpán Vlašín's estimation,

> 1920s Poetism is usually believed to be the only original literary -ism to have been born in Bohemia, but I am of the opinion that Neumann's conception and poetic realisation of civilisational art is an older original -ism. This movement is neither a Czech variant of Futurism, nor of cubism, and neither is it an offshoot of expressionism. The movement does include some ingredients of the above, yet it is no eclectic or random miscellany but rather an idiosyncratic synthesis.[28]

Nové zpěvy (New Songs), Neumann's 1918 Futurist/Civilist collection of "poems from 1911-1918," is subdivided into such typical sections as "Songs of Wires," "Songs of Lights," "Songs out of Clamour," and includes such poems as "In Praise

[27] Neumann, "Otevřená okna" 68.

[28] Štěpán Vlašín, "Od civilizační poezie k proletářskému umění: k Neumannovu básnickému vývoji v letech 1913-1923," *Česká literatura*, 23.5 (1975): 398.

of the Rotary-Press," "At the Circus," "Song of the Brothel Lights," and "In the Workers' Name." Marinetti is present both as a reference point and spirit:

> Hunger, desire and love, the wind and meadow flowers
> just as railway stations, post offices, wires, and down there, the freeway,
> how strong things connect us with everyone and everything,
> Verhaeren, Dostoevsky, Rabindranath Tagore, and Marinetti,
> just as that crone gawking at us from behind her geraniums,
> they are with us, we with them. With the world's silences and storms.[29]

In Neumann's vision, technology has the benefit of levelling moral distinctions and bridging socio-economic divisions, as can be seen in "Zpěvy drátů" (Songs of Wires):

> We, wires telegraphic, telephonic, and electrical
> are the metallic hands of modern connectivity,
> faithful and reliable, fast and energetic,
> indolently, we rank evil together with good, vice with virtue,
> palaces alongside tenement-houses, cloisters next to brothels.[30]

Equally Futurist in spirit is his celebration of the tawdry urban mundane and proclivity for violent imagery and similes, cf. the opening of "Cirkus" (At the Circus):

> I love its posters,
> exploding like grenades,
> smiling like dolled-up girls;
> so much admired by children small and big,
> overjoyed at merely brushing their hands
> over life's illusion, fanning them brusquely,
> merrily agape.
> the town's been invaded,
> by signboards brutally raped.[31]

[29] Stanislav Kostka Neumann, "Zpěv zimní," *Nové zpěvy*, 2nd expanded edn (Prague: Fr. Borový, 1936) 56.
[30] Neumann, "Zpěvy drátů," *Nové zpěvy* 12.
[31] Neumann, "Zpěv zimní" 99.

However solitary and ultimately short-lived, Neumann's Futurist-inspired Civilism was not without its followers/co-travellers. As early as March 1913, Otakar Theer (featuring in Neumann's list) published his poetic programme called "My Poetics," later included in his collection *Všemu navzdory* (In Spite of It All), wearing proudly the combined influence of Neumann's exhortations and Bergson's *élan vital*:

> There's no sublime, no low,
> all's a mysteriously unified happening,
> a protean frothy wave of spirit,
> dancing with the sleep of matter.
> Poet,
> live and listen! […]
> The world lies at your feet – images' immense paradise:
> cast your predatory eye and take
> whatever you may please.[32]

Neumann and Theer were definitely not the avant-garde mainstream, but neither were they alone: joined by Josef Hora, Artuš Černík, in 1913-14 their Futurist-inspired Civilism presented a full-fledged substantial movement whose praise was sung by none lesser than the Čapek brothers.

Whatever promise it may have held was put paid to by the outbreak of the War, which Neumann spent as an ambulance-driver on the Albanian front. After his first-hand experience of the horrors of WWI, in 1918 Neumann embarked on a political career and in May of that very important year of 1921, became one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Neumann thereby renounced his pre-war avant-gardism in favour of politically committed proletarian poetry.

4.

Alena Pomajzlová opens her ground-breaking (and only extant) monograph on the work of "the only authentic Czech Futurist,"[33] the extraordinary if forgotten artist Růžena Zátková as follows:

[32] Otakar Theer, "Má poetika," *Všemu navzdory* (Prague: Fr. Borový, 1916) 44-45.
[33] Šmejkal, "Futurismus a české umění" 47.

> In December 1921 on his tour promoting Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti visited Prague where he performed his theatrical synthesis in Švanda Theatre and gave a lecture on Futurism. He concluded his second speech with the following exclamation: "In the name of Růžena Zátková long live Futurism! Long live Futurist Prague!" The audience only recalled the second part of Marinetti's expression – the first part, with a name not known in Prague […] was glossed over and eventually forgotten.[34]

The oblivion, however, did not come about of its own accord, but seems to have been abetted if not orchestrated by the newspaper reports penned by some prominent Poetists, which uncoincidentally omit any mention of Zátková. Here is Teige writing on 15 January 1921:

> He came, was heard, he conquered. At least he thinks so. The Futurist evenings […] had a loud and unexpected success. The applause encouraged the Italian poet and propagator of Futurism to end his performance on Wednesday by thanking the audience and exclaiming enthusiastically: "Long Live Futurist Prague!"[35]

To remove any doubts regarding a possible oversight, the self-same omission occurs in Josef Kodíček's report for the *Tribuna* daily from the same day. If Zátková's work was relegated for many decades to come to the dustbin of history, this was not only because she was the sole foreigner and woman within the narrower Italian Futurist circle, or because throughout her short life she kept oscillating between the Italian Futurist orthodoxy and Russian Cubo-Futurist mysticism. It was also due to these and other minor elisions from official accounts by Teige and company. The only review of Zátková's work published in Prague during her life appeared in the German *Prager Tagblatt*,[36] and it was not until 1929 that Zátková gained at least an honourable mention in Teige's essay titled "F.T. Marinetti + Italian Modernism + International Futurism."

[34] Alena Pomajzlová, "Introduction," *Rů-Žena: příběh malířky Růženy Zátkové / Story of the Painter Růžena Zátková*, trans. Magdalena and Lawrence Wells, Branislava Kuburović, David Brooker, Alena Pomajzlová (Prague: Arbor vitae, 2011) 263.

[35] Karel Teige, "F.T. Marinetti a futurismus," *Aktuality a kuriozity*, 1.8-10 (15 January 1922): 77-79.

[36] Hans Barth, "Vierzig Meter unter der Erde: Die Ausstellung einer Tschechin in Rom," *Prager Tagblatt*, 14.6 (19 January 1923): 6.

The reasons for Zátková's marginalisation and omission have largely to do with her nomadic life. From very early on, having moved to Rome in 1910 at the age of twenty-five in order to get married to Russian diplomat Khvoshchinsky, she lived and worked in the international circle of the Italian Futurists and Russian avant-garde. She personally knew and collaborated with not only Marinetti himself, but also Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and Igor Stravinsky. Her contacts with them and the artistically stimulating environment informed her innovative, experimental work: abstraction and multi-material assemblages with a kinetic element, unique and prescient in the arts of the time. Her work and life were peripatetic and not restricted to Italy and Futurism only: she spent a key period of 1916-19 in Swiss Leysin, recovering from the first serious bouts of tuberculosis and working with Goncharova and Larionov on Biblical illuminations and heavily spiritual "luminous paintings." It was also there, following her divorce from the Russian Czarist diplomat, that she remarried, this time to "Marinetti's red brother-in-law," socialist journalist Arturo Cappa.[37]

Apart from several paintings departing from such Futurist principles as Dynamism or Tactilism, Zátková's work also contains a few Marinetti portraits, much revered and promoted by him. Her long correspondence with "F.T.M." also contains a few notes of criticism regarding the perceived Futurist herd mentality and the rejection of Futurism as dogma:

> I am nameless, with no religion, family, homeland, with no limits in thought. I don't have to keep telling you, who are identically or almost identically constituted, but I have to tell your 'herd.' You live in your creation, your life is of consequence in every detail, free, boundless and creative, but the others just tag along.[38]

Still, she did admire Marinetti's liberated attitude to creativity and was drawn into the vortex of his creative energy. Zátková became fully drawn to Futurism later than Neumann and company: it was Marinetti's later manifesto from 1915, *The Futurist Synthetic Theatre*, and his 1917 *Manifesto of Futurist Dance*, to which Zátková responded in her sole own foray into literary forms of expression, her 1920 dance performance with Futurist anti-music called *The Madman*. Inspired by her experience of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes troupe, Zátková adopted the Futurist concept of "synthetic theatre" which concentrated words, gestures and

37 Pomajzlová 331.
38 Pomajzlová 173.

music into very short periods of time, with individual scenes oftentimes lasting a few seconds only – thus resembling the dynamics of the cinema.

The Madman consists of three scenes displaying the alternation of slow motion, immobility and dynamism, qualities which Zátková explored in her painting as well. The first act featured an actor wearing a fool's mask and engaging in pantomime, the second comprised two madmen performing absurdist word exchange, and the third consisted in an expressive 'dance' of the two madmen in colourful costumes. Throughout, improvisation and impulsivity were encouraged, the play scripted in only its main contours. As Zátková wrote to Larionov:

> It consists of three acts: The first, where the madman meets a man with whom he seems to get along. They wander aimlessly here and there and so it continues. That is the 'slow movement.' The second, where the madman meets people who call him mad and he calls them the same in return. That is 'immobility.' And the third, where the madman meets a madman. That is 'dynamism.' It consists of a ballet duo for the two madmen and flamboyantly painted scenery. Everything as simple as possible. The actual ground on which they bounce about is designed so that it gives an impression of movement. […] That is all.[39]

Zátková expressed her regret that the play was left only as a script, never performed together with other Futurist synthetic productions, this due to Marinetti's objections: "He felt that the first two parts (both very short) were somewhat obscure, but he loved the ballet."[40] Still, *The Madman* is clear proof that following Marinetti's example, Zátková expanded her artistic expression beyond fine arts. She did not stop at the theatre only, but also penned various essays, notes, reviews as well as poems – reportedly, Marinetti liked them so much he even set some to music. Sadly, Zátková only managed to begin re-connecting with Prague and re-entering the local cultural scene via her first exhibitions in the early 1920s, a re-entry thwarted by her untimely death in 1923 at the age of thirty-eight.

[39] Zátková's letter to Larionov from 18 June 1920, quoted in Pomajzlová 344.
[40] Pomajzlová 345.

5.

But Futurism in the 'Czech context' implied much more than the stigma of the maverick (Neumann, Theer) or the curse of the wanderer (Zátková). In the early 1920s, the self-appointed "Young Ones from Devětsil" were on the lookout for their own place within the large international avant-garde constellation before letting it collapse into the Poetist orthodoxy, which itself did not appear *ex nihilo*. Trying to extricate themselves from the extant literary paradigms, the Devětsil generation was rather hasty in rallying behind the cause of proletarian art, but the four years between 1920 and 1924 were a period of experimentation, and even proletarian art came with the subcutaneous tissue of Neumann's Futurism.

As Gwóźdź-Szewczenko has argued, Devětsil's proletarian doctrine recoded the Futurist code in order to formulate its strongly ideological system, despite officially refusing its programme. Some passages in the programmatic pronouncements of the times seem copied from the manifestoes of Russian or Italian Futurists. There is Karel Schulz's post-expressionist "Próza" (Prose) from 1924, where "the antenna mast of the radiotelegraphic apparatus is more beautiful than the Discobolus or Venus de Milo,"[41] directly echoing Marinetti's 1909 eulogy on the racing car, perhaps via Neumann's own 1913 farewell to symbolism: "Goodbye, symbolism! Goodbye, gardens of soul, dimmed colours, weary eyes, perverse pleasures! Long live the petards of Pégoud's engine!"[42] Awareness of the Futurist coding and agenda went further than tips of the hat and sloganeering. Its absorption within Poetism is clear from mid-1920s poetry collections penned by such prominent Devětsil members as Vítězslav Nezval and Jaroslav Seifert.

Many years after Marinetti's Prague triumph, Nezval still recalled "the unforgettable performance organised by F.T. Marinetti" in his memoirs as follows:

> His Futurist syntheses, which later on Honzl and I were also busy staging, were atmospheric, scintillating with highest drama. Marinetti was capable of organising a perfect humbug, and so while he recited eccentric poems full of interjections, a dancer was dancing around him to the accompaniment of an out-of-tune piano playing the well-known "Herkulesbad" waltz. Some audience members booed, others rushed to

[41] Karel Schulz, "Próza," *Avantgarda známá i neznámá*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín et al. (Prague: Svoboda, 1971) 527.

[42] Neumann, *Ať žije život!* 117.

> the defence of the Futurist performance, and so many a skirmish broke out. In the thick of it I commenced acclaiming him out loud as opposed to those wanting to disturb his performance. After all, in a few years, Frejka, E.F. Burian, Honzl and I would set up theatre evoking feelings in audiences of a similarly ambivalent kind.[43]

Nezval's *Moderní básnické směry* (Modern Poetry Movements) from 1937 offers insight into his generous and inclusive understanding of Poetism's indebtedness to Futurism. Praised is first of all its literary contribution and Marinetti's "fight against all traditional poetic and artistic means of expression such as rhyme, rhythm, composition, even syntactical sentence structures."[44] He further approves of Futurist enthusiasm for modern speed and simultaneity, and technology in general.

In doing so, Nezval harks back thirteen years to his 1924 programmatic text, *Papoušek na motocyklu čili o řemesle básnickém* (Parrot on the Motorbike, or, the Craft of Poetry). Nezval's treatise advertises its Futurist credentials in its very title, a simultaneous combination of two distant notions: exoticism and modern technology. Also important is that poetry is treated as "craft" (i.e., not as "art"), which demythologises the romantic notion of poetry as inspiration or transcendence. Nezval's text is close to Marinetti's manifestos in its experimental typography, making liberal and rather jarring use of italics, bold fonts, and capitals, as well as diction. The text swarms with imperatives ("Ask the belly-dancers and fire-swallowers!"), modal verbs ("One needs to see electric flowers and smell the pleasant scent of repugnant throng") and interjections ("Hooo, what labour!").[45]

The didactic gist of Nezval's *Papoušek na motocyklu* consists in a series of playful definitions of literary tropes and schemes, but with a difference, as small poems in prose. As when Nezval provides a definition of rhyme: "Rhyme: Bringing together distant wastelands, times, races and casts through a verbal consonance. Inventing marvellous friendships."[46] In accordance with Marinetti's doctrine of Tactilism, Nezval's text also repeatedly appeals to "all senses," not just sight and hearing, and a specific sense of corporeality, as when he writes: "I'm in constant touch with my digestion."[47]

43 Vítězslav Nezval, *Z mého života* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965) 72-73.
44 Vítězslav Nezval, *Moderní básnické směry* (Prague: Dědictví Komenského, 1937) 103.
45 Vítězslav Nezval, "Papoušek na motocyklu," *Avantgarda známá i neznámá*, 566-69.
46 Nezval, "Papoušek na motocyklu" 568.
47 Nezval, "Papoušek na motocyklu" 566.

Just as Nezval's, so do Seifert's memoirs include his eye-witness account of Marinetti's visit to Teige's flat, peppered with some amusing details:

> It was in Teige's flat that we met Marinetti during his Prague visit. He boasted of having inherited seven brothels in Cairo from some relative, all very lucrative businesses. From the profits he also allegedly financed the Futurist movement in Italy. He recited some of his *Words in Freedom* for us, pacing to and fro, waving his hands, jumping around, squatting. He was an immensely vivacious and amiable Italian. He admired the Czech language. It was the only language, to his mind, in which Marinetti had several names. Sometimes he caught "Marinettiho," other times "Marinettimu." That pleased him immensely. Sadly enough, he later gained ill repute, working as a pilot in the Second Italo-Ethopian War. He lost our hearts soon afterwards.[48]

Seifert's 1925 collection *Na vlnách TSF* (On the Waves of TSF) again wears its Futurist heart on the very cover – "TSF" standing for the French "Télégraphie sans fil" / the Italian "telegrafia senza fili," or wireless telegraphy, referring to the basic tenets of Marinetti's Futurism, technological innovation (in this case Guglielmo Marconi's), speed and simultaneity. Opening with two programmatic poems "Guillaume Apollinaire" and "Fervent Fruit" ("Žhavé ovoce"), the collection is divided into two parts, "Honeymoon" – poems inspired by travels around France and Italy – and the eccentrically titled "Frozen Pineapples and Other Lyrical Anecdotes."

Marked by typographical experimentation from the dedication page ("For Teige, Nezval, and Honzl") onwards, the collection features such prototypically Futurist pieces as "The Circus", whose typographical arrangement resembles that of an advertisement poster:

[48] Jaroslav Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa*, in *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, vol. 15 (Prague: Akropolis, 2015) 247.

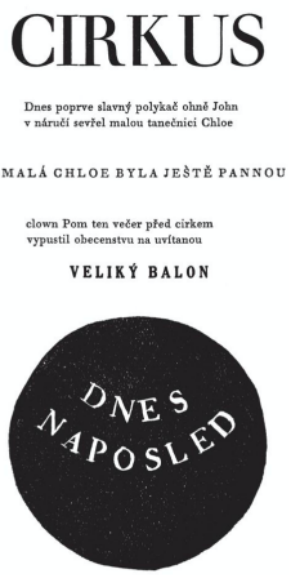

Fig 1. Jaroslav Seifert, "Cirkus," *Na vlnách TSF* (1925).

Seifert's poem "New York" features such instances of spatiotemporal simultaneity as the following quatrain:

THIS IS NO MAID OF ORLEANS
THIS IS THE FAMOUS STATUE OF LIBERTY
CARRYING A TORCH TO SCORCH
THE AIRPLANE'S WINGS[49]

In a highly economic form, the quatrain stages a meeting of a whole range of very distant phenomena: Joan of Arc with the Statue of Liberty, mediaeval France with 20th-century New York, legendary history with mundane contemporaneity.

Most explicitly Futurist is Seifert's poem "MY ITALY," whose typographical arrangement again requires full reproduction:

[49] Jaroslav Seifert, *Na vlnách TSF* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1925) 47.

Fig 2. Jaroslav Seifert, "Má Itálie," *Na vlnách TSF* (1925).

The capitalised basis of the poem is formed by the conjugation of some Italian irregular verbs "to stay/be," "to do," "to give" and "to go": "STO STAI STA STIAMO STATE STANO […] FO FAI FA FACCIAMO FATE FANO […] DO DAI DA DIAMO DATE DANO […] VO VAI VA ANDIAMO ANDATE VANO."[50] Seifert's "modern poem of Italian grammar" – similarly to Nezval's *Alphabet* – refers to some original principle, creating a poem out of verbal sequences taken from Italian grammar books. The rest revolves around the unsettling image of "Mussolini riding a motorbike down Forum Romanum […] under empty Renaissance skies" – perhaps pointing out that all search for 'origins' smacks of fascism and runs, just as the poem's typography, awry. As Seifert writers in line 8,

50 Seifert, *Na vlnách TSF* 21.

"Perhaps it's not a poem, but whatever it is…," this text is clear proof that his meeting with Marinetti left an indelible imprint.[51]

6.

In conclusion, some light needs to be shed on why Futurism underwent such marginalisation within the mainstream Czech avant-garde theoretical and critical discourse. The argument put forth here is that Futurism's dismissal was brought about by Devětsil's 'press secretary' Teige's own anxiety of influence vis-à-vis Marinetti, as well as by the two movements' political divagations.

Teige was always highly reluctant to acknowledge explicitly any Futurist inspiration for his own Poetist project, assuming on numerous occasions a negative attitude. He never tired of pointing out that despite its achievements in the fine arts and perhaps the theatre, together with its predecessors (Expressionism, Cubism, Neo-classicism), Futurism left no significant traces in literature.

The first point that needs to be made, however, is that Teige's own theorisation of Poetism was informed from the get-go by his exposure to Futurism, which no conscious suppressions could quite eradicate. His first manifesto from 1924, simply entitled *Poetismus* (Poetism), was (according to Teige's own later avowal) inspired by Soffici's theory of art as disinterested play and culture of instincts, published long before the war in Futurist magazine *Lacerba*. Accordingly, Teige's manifesto is steeped in such Futurist sentiments as clear break with the past, critique of passéism, celebration of science, the megapolis, technology, and promotion of 'lower' forms of art production: the circus, the cabaret, and sports. Marinetti makes a cameo alongside Apollinaire and Birot in Teige's praise of "poetry visualised."[52]

In the next programmatic thesis of Poetism, *Manifest poetismu* (Manifesto of Poetism) from 1928, Teige describes Poetism's departure from proletarian art on the basis of their different traditional anchoring – turning the text into an overview of Poetism's inspirational sources. Following a lineage from Baudelaire via Poe and Verlaine to Mallarmé is Marinetti, whom Teige depicts as a revolutionary who completes the freeing of verse by means of "a radical reorganisation of the poetic form, annulling punctuation, abolishing syntax, introducing mathematical or musical notation wherever rules of reading allow

[51] For more see Radka Divíšková's detailed account of Seifert's and Nezval's Futurist forays in "Wireless Imagination," esp. 51-63 and 72-76.

[52] Karel Teige, "Poetismus," *Avantgarda známá i neznámá* 558.

it."[53] For his distrust of rationality and intellection and appeal to intuition and the subconscious, Marinetti is also credited as precursor of other movements, namely Dada and Surrealism (though not Poetism quite yet).

In another text for the February 1929 issue of *ReD*, marking the twentieth anniversary of Marinetti's first Futurist manifesto, what Teige praises first and foremost about him are his spirit of revolt, radicalness and modernity with which the artefact is connected to the machine and art to the urban life. Other Futurist achievements include Marinetti's typographical reform and the "wireless imagination of Marinetti's 'liberated words' as presage of the free associations of surrealism and poetism." The final note of praise is worded with strange reluctance: "The sum total of all the Futurist positive achievements compels us, twenty years since the first signal of this movement, to express our admiration for and acknowledgment of the creative power that gave rise to them, especially – to F.T. Marinetti."[54] This note of compulsive praise is further qualified by Teige's criticism. First, of Marinetti's above-mentioned list of Czech avant-gardists in his *World Futurist Manifesto* – whom, in Teige's opinion, Marinetti included "unjustly," as the only "real" Czech Futurist is Neumann; and second (and more importantly), of Futurism's close connection to capitalism and right-wing politics, where "the Futurist idolatry of civilisation is idolatry of capitalism, whose disruptive forces destroy civilisation."[55]

Despite Poetism's break with proletarian art, its political stance always remained markedly on the left, and as Futurism's post-war alliance with Fascism was becoming increasingly prominent, alienation was bound to settle in. Devětsil's leftism was the main stronghold on which Teige could posit its ideological difference from Futurism while conveniently denying it value or relevance. A similar point is conveyed in Giuseppe Dierna's article on Teige and Italian Futurism called "Refusal and Debts." Teige's refusal of Futurism rested chiefly on two strategic misrepresentations thereof: as a dysfunctional aestheticism divorced from society, and as a long-dead movement, relegated to the dustbin of history and to be superseded (by, among others, Poetism of course). Both led Teige to insist that "there has been no Futurist Czech art, nor will there be one."[56]

53 Karel Teige, "Manifest poetismu," *Avantgarda známá i neznámá* 565.

54 Karel Teige, "F.T. Marinetti + italská moderna + světový Futurismus," *ReD*, 6 (February 1929): 204.

55 Teige, "F.T. Marinetti" 197.

56 Quoted in Giuseppe Dierna, "Karel Teige a italský futurismus: odmítnutí a dluhy," *Umění*, 43.1-2 (1995): 61.

7.

Still, the existence of Futurism in the Czechoslovak literary avant-garde is indubitable – it found its expression both on the surface level (commentaries and critical notes) and in deeper layers, taking creative part in the formation of Poetist artistic doctrines. As Gwóźdź- Szewczenko has argued, these two aspects were not complementary but antagonistic: "The surface level, dominated by critical notes twisting Futurism's artistic message, was covering a deeper layer, in which Futurism fed the local literary and artistic programmes."[57] Quite clearly, instrumental in this twisting of Futurism's message was Teige himself, who quite soon after Marinetti's visit to Prague cut off their contact, as documented by his August 1922 letter to Seifert: "Marinetti has written again, demanding I send him photographs. I'm at a loss what to do with the fool."[58]

This denial came at the cost of marginalising the native scene (Neumann, Theer, et al.), obliterating some internationalist émigrés (Zátková), and supressing the Futurist moment in Poetism itself and the early-20s works of some diehard Poetists (Nezval, Seifert). Ties with Marinetti having been severed, ground was prepared for the ideological and aesthetic clearing that would pave the way for Teige's Poetism. Prague was to go down in avant-garde history books as a Poetist, not Futurist (or Dadaist) capital – but, as ongoing scholarship outside the mainstream keeps discovering, more avant-gardes thrived within her hundred spires than were dreamt of in Teige's philosophy.

[57] Gwóźdź-Szewczenko, "Skrytá tvář futurismu v Čechách" 94.
[58] Dierna 62.