

*A Case Study in Poetic Translation and Ideology: The Italian Reception of Vladimir Mayakovsky's Poetry*¹

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Abstract. This article investigates the Italian reception of Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry as a case study of the relationship between poetic translation and ideology. Based on a corpus of 96 Italian translations published in book form between 1923 and 2025, it reconstructs Mayakovsky's trajectory within the Italian literary polysystem and identifies three major phases in his reception. Adopting a bifocal methodology that combines cultural-historical analysis with close textual readings, the study examines processes of selection, ideological marking, and translation strategies. The first phase (1914–1945) is marked by marginalisation and predominantly informative translations. The second phase (1946–1979) corresponds to Mayakovsky's canonisation as the “poet of the Revolution”, with translations privileging ideological content over formal experimentation, while also giving rise to alternative poetic readings, most notably by Angelo Maria Ripellino. The third phase, emerging after 1989, reflects a post-ideological climate and renewed scholarly attention to Mayakovsky's love poetry. The article argues that Mayakovsky's Italian reception has been continuously reshaped by shifting ideological frameworks, with poet-translators playing a key mediating role.

Keywords: Mayakovsky reception; poetry translation; ideology and translation; Italian literary polysystem; poet-translators

0. Introduction

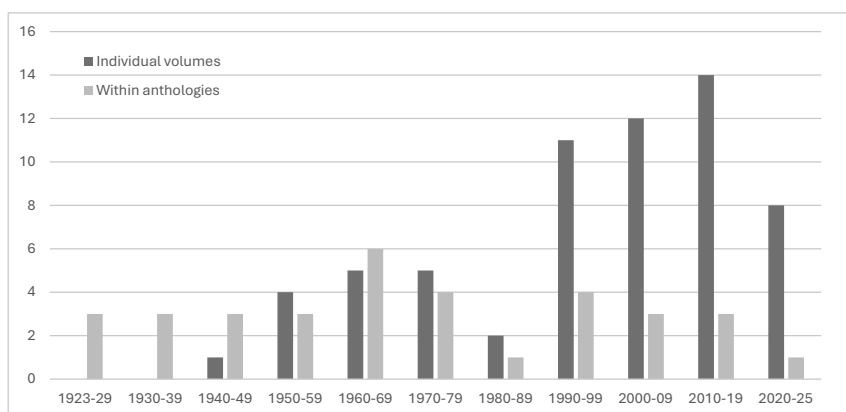
This article aims to analyse how ideological frameworks can directly affect the textual rendering of literary works into another language. To this end, we focus on the Italian translations of Vladimir Mayakovsky's (1893–1930) poetry,

¹ Although this article is the result of joint reflection and collaboration, sections 1.2, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 4.1, and 5. are attributed to Maurizia Calusio, and sections 0., 1.1, 1.3, 2.2, 3.2, 4.2 and 4.3 to Stefano Fumagalli.

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which serve as a particularly revealing case study. Not only has Mayakovsky been – alongside Pushkin – the most translated (see De Michelis 1994; Niero 2023) and discussed Russian poet in Italy over the last century, but his reception has unfolded in distinct, ideologically marked waves that often stand in contrast to one another, reflecting specific phases of Italian cultural history. During certain periods (§1, 4.1), Mayakovsky's poetry remained peripheral within the Italian "literary polysystem" (see Even-Zohar 1990). In other phases, however, it occupied a more central position, albeit interpreted through shifting lenses: while some eras (§3.2) prioritised the experimental and avant-garde dimensions of his work, others (§2) shifted the emphasis to the Bolshevik Mayakovsky canonised by Soviet scholars after 1935, at Stalin's behest.

Given the extent of the material, we have narrowed the research corpus to the 96³ translations of Mayakovsky's poetry which were published in book form (either as individual volumes or within anthologies) between 1923 – the year of the first printed version – and 2025:



³ We relied primarily on the bibliography compiled by Alessandro Niero (2023), to which we added the volumes published between June 2023 and December 2025, as well as other publications not included in the scholar's bibliography (e.g. Aube 1924). Our selection includes reeditions of earlier translations.

A significant exception⁴ is made for a single version published in the periodical press: “Fleita-pozvonochnik” (“The Backbone Flute”⁵), translated by the poet Nelo Risi (1920–2015) and featured in the 1947 issue of the journal *Domus*.

Methodologically, to examine Mayakovsky’s Italian “trajectory” (Bourdieu 1996: 258–261) we have adopted a ‘bifocal’ perspective that combines a broad cultural-historical overview with a targeted textual analysis of selected passages. On the one hand, we investigate what Pierre Bourdieu defines as the operations of “sélection”, “marquage”, and “lecture” (2002: 4–5): specifically, the selection of texts to be translated, the explicit ideological ‘marking’ attributed to the author and their work, often via the paratextual apparatus, and, in certain instances, their critical and public reception. On the other hand, for some particularly significant versions which we deemed exemplary of the most important translational trends, this overview is complemented by a closer stylistic examination of specific verses⁶ focusing on key metrical, lexical, syntactic, and figurative elements. We thus aim to show how specific ideological stances lead translators to foreground certain textual features while sidelining others.

1. The first phase (1914–1945)

1.1 Mayakovsky’s reception amongst the Italian Futurists

The decades between the 1910s and the early 1940s marked the gradual discovery of Mayakovsky in Italy, though the reception of his work remained relatively limited. Rather than his poetry as such, at this stage it was primarily the poet’s persona that attracted attention, with information probably reaching Italy through the mediation of French sources (a notable example is Vladimir Pozner’s 1929 book, *Panorama de la littérature russe contemporaine*, which significantly contributed to the knowledge of early 20th century Russian literature well beyond France).

Among Italian Futurists, Mayakovsky was likewise known more for his reputation as a scandalous figure than for his poetry, a fact hardly surprising if one recalls, for instance, his famous 1914 appearance at a Moscow lecture

⁴ This exception is justified both by the prominence of the translator, who was among the earliest, and one of the very few, Italian poets to engage in the translation of a Russian poet, and by the translation’s significance as an attempt to articulate an alternative reading of Mayakovsky’s poetry, one that, as will be shown (§3.1), departs from the dominant interpretation established during the 1940s.

⁵ All translations from Russian and Italian into English are the authors’ own.

⁶ Practical constraints of space preclude a more exhaustive analysis.

by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), the founder of Italian Futurism: on that occasion, the Russian poet wore a flamboyant red tuxedo and openly protested against the lecture being in French (see Salaris 2012). Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, relations between Italian and Russian Futurists were largely defined by conflict and polemics (see De Michelis 2009). Initially, tensions arose from the Russian poets' insistence on their independence from the Italian movement, whereas the Italians vigorously asserted their primacy, claiming all similar European movements as direct offshoots of their own. Following the October Revolution and the consolidation of Fascism, this hostility shifted to the ideological level: Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurists embraced the Bolshevik cause, while Marinetti and his followers, despite some fluctuations, aligned themselves with Mussolini's regime. The divide between the two movements inevitably widened, as exemplified by the "non-encounter" between Marinetti and Mayakovsky in Paris in 1925 (see Salaris 2024: 194–204). Consequently, it is futile to seek traces of Mayakovsky's poetic influence within Italian Futurism; within the Italian avant-garde, his work found only a weak reception, confined to a marginal group of left-wing Futurists who were sympathetic to Bolshevism⁷.

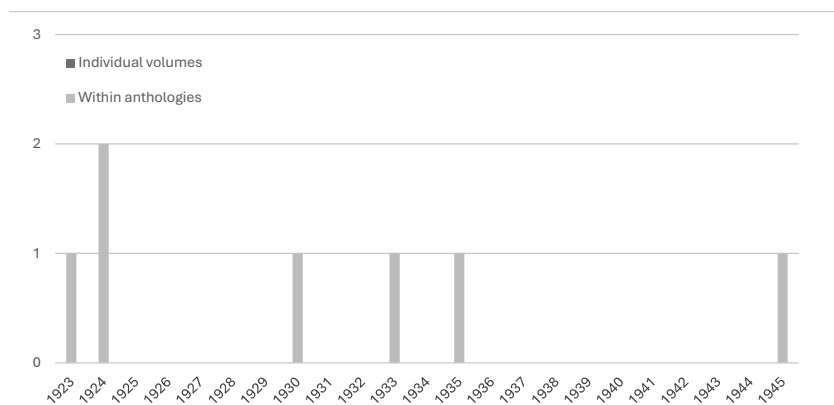
1.2 *The first translations of Mayakovsky's poetry*

Despite his notoriety as a public figure – magnified by the international attention following his suicide in 1930 – Mayakovsky's fame did not translate in Italy into a corresponding circulation of his poetry (in contrast to the reception of other Russian poets such as Blok and Yesenin). This was partly due to political reasons: the Fascist regime fostered a hostile climate for the 'tribune' of the Bolshevik revolution, especially from the 1930s onwards. However, strictly literary factors were perhaps even more decisive. Mayakovsky's Futurism was entirely alien to the then-hegemonic trend in Italian poetry of Hermeticism, an "ascetic variant of Symbolism", in Joseph Brodsky's words (1996: 16). As Itamar Even-Zohar argues, after all, "that very principles of selecting the works to be

⁷ These were minor figures such as Dino Terra, Vinicio Paladini and Umberto Barbaro (see Lista 2011). The latter had a knowledge of Russian and, between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, devoted a few articles to Mayakovsky, also translating some of his poems (Majakovskij 1927, 1929; Barbaro 1930). These translations, however, published in newspapers and journals, remain largely isolated cases: Italian Futurists with Bolshevik sympathies were primarily interested in the Soviet figurative avant-gardes.

translated are determined by the situation governing the (home) polysystem” (1990: 47).

Between 1923 and 1945, only seven translations of Mayakovsky appeared in Italy, all of them within anthologies:



With the aim of focusing on translations of broader circulation and greater relevance, we have chosen not to dwell in detail on these versions⁸ (Lo Gatto 1923; Naldi Olkienizkaia 1924; Aube 1924; Anagnine, Longo 1930; Reavey et al. 1935; Reavey et al. 1945²), which, despite their pioneering character, were primarily literal and documentary in nature. Amongst these early translators, however, Renato Poggioli (1907–1963) – “the most prominent Italian scholar of modern Russian literature of the early postwar period” (De Michelis 2015) – stands apart. In his 1933 anthology *La violetta notturna* (*The Night Violet*), Poggioli included a translation of Mayakovsky’s “Voenno-morskaya lyubov” (“Naval Romance”, 1915). By selecting this single text, he effectively relegated Mayakovsky to the role of humorous poet, leaving aside his political verse, which he dismissed as a “booming propaganda loudspeaker” (Poggioli 1933: 26). Nevertheless, this translation marked a pivotal milestone: it was the first non-informative rendering, distinguished by its close attention to formal features, as Poggioli reproduced both the poem’s rhythm and its perfect rhyming couplets.

⁸ For an in-depth study of the anthologies by Lo Gatto, Naldi Olkienizkaia, and Aube, see Sulpasso 2021; for a more comprehensive discussion of the earliest Italian translations of Mayakovsky, see Calusio 2015: 35–40.

1.3 A coherent translation strategy

Poggioli revisited Mayakovsky in *Il fiore del verso russo* (*The Flower of Russian Verse*), the new and expanded 1949 edition of *La violetta notturna*. While chronologically a postwar publication, its critical stance and translational criteria remain firmly rooted in the prewar cultural milieu. In addition to “Voenno-morskaya lyubov”, Poggioli now includes two more texts: a political poem, “Nash marsh” (“Our March”, 1918), as well as “Fleita-pozvonochnik”⁹ (1915), a pre-revolutionary long love poem. Though the selection remains relatively modest, Mayakovsky’s poetry is presented here in a far more comprehensive manner than in 1933.

In his introduction, Poggioli highlights Mayakovsky’s formal innovations, defining him as the embodiment of “free verse” in contemporary Russian poetry and dwelling on the “one-penny jewel” of rhyme, which the poet employs with great freedom not only in terms of frequency and placement, but also with regard to quality and composition” (Poggioli 1949: 145, 149). Consequently, Poggioli’s translations prioritise these formal elements, especially Mayakovsky’s diverse rhyming practices, occasionally at the expense of the poems’ ideological substance.

In “Nash marsh”, for example, Poggioli strives to replicate not only the pattern of imperfect rhymes but also the original’s rich alliteration. This strategy, however, demands significant semantic sacrifices. This is evident in the opening line: “Бейте в площади бунтов топот!” (“Beat the stomp of riots into the squares!”), which Poggioli (1949: 472) renders as “Batti in piazza il passo dell’odio” (“Beat the step of hatred in the square”). To achieve an imperfect rhyme between lines 1 and 3 (odio : diluvio (hatred : deluge)), Poggioli alters the meaning, obscuring the poem’s political edge: the ideological charge of “riots” is distorted into the negative emotion “hatred”. Furthermore, by replacing the second-person plural imperative “бейте” with the singular “batti”, he transforms a collective political call into an individual appeal. As for his language, despite acknowledging Mayakovsky’s colloquial, irreverent tone, Poggioli often resorts to bookish vocabulary such as “tratturo” (sheep track), reminiscent of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s poetry (1863–1938), for the Russian

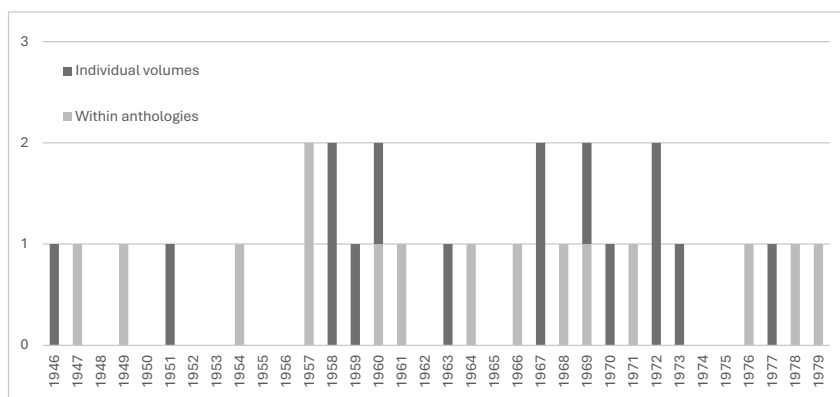
⁹ It is noteworthy that within the span of just three years, from 1946 to 1949, three different translations of “Fleita-pozvonochnik” were published in Italy. In addition to Poggioli’s version, two more appeared in periodicals, one by Maria Bianca Gallinaro (published in *Società* in 1946) and another by Nelo Risi (published in *Domus* in 1947). It is likely that the impetus for these works came from France, where two translations of the poem – by Armand Robin and Assia Lassaigue – had appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1939) and *L’Arche* (1944), respectively.

“arba” (bullock cart), or “inciellare” (to place in heaven) for “na nebo nas vzyali zhivym” (alive they took us to the sky), thereby altering the original’s register.

2. The second phase (1946–1979)

2.1 A new interpretative framework

Chronologically, with *Il fiore del verso russo* we have entered the second phase (1946–1979), during which thirty translations were published, fifteen as individual volumes, fifteen within anthologies:



This period saw the establishment of a new interpretative framework, and following Stalin’s 1935 directives, Mayakovsky was in turn canonised in Italy as a cult author.

This radical, party-oriented reinterpretation was facilitated by two factors. First, the ascent of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the largest in the West and the second largest political force in Italy (after Christian Democracy) since 1946, which attained significant cultural hegemony in the decades following Italy’s liberation from Fascism. Second, the rise of Neorealism in the late 1940s, which challenged the dominance of Hermeticism by advocating for politically engaged poetry, one that required new aesthetic models (see Turconi 1977; Spampinato 2025).

2.2 *Two translations of the long poem “Lenin”*

In this context, the ‘new’ Mayakovsky was introduced to Italian readers by Pietro Zveteremich’s (1922–1992) translation of the long poem *Lenin*, published in 1946 by Einaudi, a leading postwar publisher that became pivotal to the Italian left. This volume was the first entirely devoted to a translation of Mayakovsky’s poetry. The book’s ideological orientation is apparent at every level, beginning with the selection of the text itself: “Lenin”, hagiographically centred on the figure of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov and dedicated to the Russian Communist Party, is the most overtly ideological amongst Mayakovsky’s long poems. The selection may even have followed a direct suggestion from the Soviet authorities¹⁰. As shown by the transcript of an editorial meeting on 25th July 1945, translations from Russian at Einaudi were discussed with the Soviet embassy in Rome: “Zvete[remich] reports having gone to the embassy with Manacorda to discuss the list of translations from Russian that he had previously compiled. The Russian cultural attaché informed them that not all works published before ’38–’39 can be translated, as not all are deemed acceptable”, and shortly thereafter Zveteremich is instructed “to ask the embassy whether something by Mayakovsky might be published” (Munari 2013: 41). The book’s paratext likewise shows a clear ideological stance. Zveteremich arbitrarily breaks the poem into sections absent from the original, each accompanied by newly invented titles (for example “Genealogy of Capitalism”). Furthermore, the text is encumbered by intrusive explanatory notes that steer the reader toward a strictly Marxist reading. Even typographically (see Figures 1 and 2), these notes intrude on the poetic space, blurring the boundary between verse and commentary. As a result, the poem “drowns” in its paratextual apparatus and is reduced to “little more than a product of ‘socialist pedagogy’” (Niero 2019: 230).

Figures 1 and 2 – Pages from the long poem “Lenin”, 1946 edition.

¹⁰ This phenomenon was not limited to Einaudi, nor to Italy; the Soviet Union was routinely involved in similar initiatives, “partly to honour a Leninist ideological commitment to the internationalisation of culture, but primarily as an exercise in soft power” (Maguire, McAteer 2024: 2).

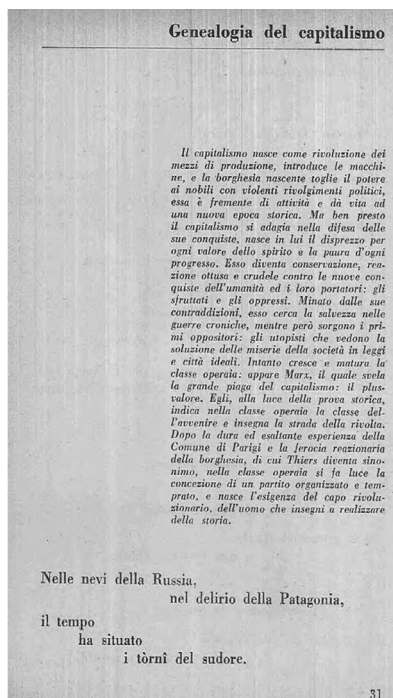


Figure 1

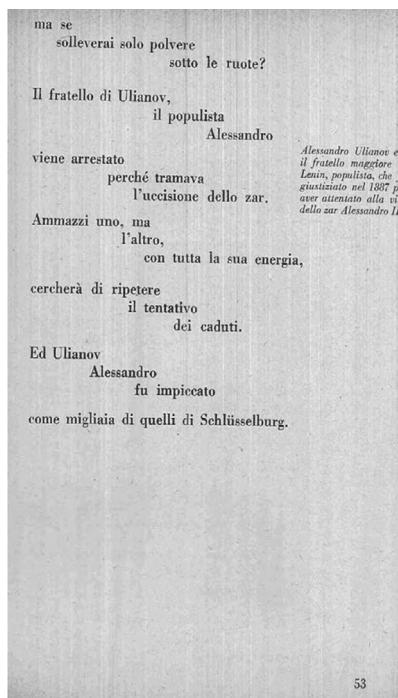


Figure 2

The same characterisation applies to a later edition in 1951, which explicitly presents “Lenin” as “one of the most important events in the history of Socialist Realism” (Majakovskij 1951: 11). The translator, Mario De Micheli (1914–2004), acknowledges that he consulted Zveteremich’s version, from which he also adopted verbatim the division of the poem into distinct cantos. The shared ideological stance of the two volumes is most evident in their translational approach. Aligned with the Soviet campaign against so-called ‘formalism’, both renderings privilege the poem’s ideological message at the expense of its aesthetic features. The outcome is a ‘prosified’ text, stripped of the stylistic and formal devices that define Mayakovsky’s poetry, i.e. rhyme, paronomasia, alliteration, rhythm and the extensive use of tropes. As a single example, one may consider lines 331–333, where metaphor – Mayakovsky’s signature rhetorical device – is attenuated by both translators into a simile (in De Micheli’s version the effect is compounded, the original three lines are compressed into two and the characteristic ‘step-ladder’ layout of the Russian text is not reproduced):

Слёзы снега с флажных покрасневших век.	Lacrime di neve dalle palpebre rosse come le bandiere. (Majakovskij 1946: 24)	Scendono lacrime di neve dalle bandiere rosse come palpebre. (Majakovskij 1951: 22)
(Tears of snow from flag-like reddened eyelids.)	(Tears of snow from the eyelids red like the flags.)	(Tears of snow fall from flags red as eyelids.)

As stated in a passage in the 1946 volume, these mediators considered Mayakovsky's verse to be "substantially untranslatable" and warned that his "formal boldness, if transferred into another language, could easily prove misleading" (Majakovskij 1946: 141¹¹). This translation strategy, as the poet Franco Fortini observed, reflects the new stylistic tendencies emerging in Italian poetry at the time: "the very broad area of predominantly informative translation in the fifteen years following the end of the war certainly had something to do with what came to be known as the language of Neorealist poetry" (Fortini 2011: 162).

2.3 Mayakovsky's canonisation

This interpretation was definitively canonised in 1958 with the publication of Mayakovsky's *Opere* (*Works*) in four volumes, a monumental editorial undertaking that made him the first, and to date the only, Russian poet to have a complete edition in Italian. The *Opere* volumes, produced by a team of seven translators¹², were edited by Ignazio Ambrogio – who in the 1960s and 1970s would translate the works of Vladimir Lenin – for Editori Riuniti, a publishing house affiliated with the PCI. In his introduction Ambrogio frames Mayakovsky according to the interpretative model dominant in the Soviet Union: "Lenin", for example, is described as an "exemplary model of Socialist Realism" (Majakovskij 1958b, vol. 1: XXXI), while the poet's pre-revolutionary output is relegated to a merely preparatory phase, later superseded by explicitly political works. As for the translation principles, Ambrogio openly followed the

¹¹ The quotation is taken from a note at the end of the volume signed by the Slavist Maria Bianca Gallinaro (Luporini).

¹² In addition to Zveteremich and De Micheli, the project involved Ignazio Ambrogio, Bruno Carnevali, Giovanni Crino (pseudonym of Giorgio Kraiski), Giovanni Ketoff, and Mario Socrate – all of them, at the time, close to the PCI.

line established by Zveteremich and De Micheli in the 1940s¹³. Speaking for the seven translators, he stated his conviction “that the substance of Mayakovsky’s poetry, like that of all authentic poetry, is to be sought not so much in meter or rhythm as *in its intuitive logical complex*”, and therefore declared that he had chosen “a type of translation which, by renouncing metrical and rhythmic values, would render with scrupulous fidelity the *precise meaning* of Mayakovsky’s poetic language” (Majakovskij 1958b, vol. 1: LVII–LVIII; our italics). Until the late 1970s – three decades marked in Italy by heated and highly polarized political debate – this ideologically driven, content-centred reading remained dominant.

3. Poetic interpretations

3.1 *Nelo Risi’s* The Flute of the Backbone

Despite the substantial predominance of the interpretative framework outlined above, the period between the 1940s and the 1970s witnessed the emergence of alternative critical readings.

A particularly noteworthy instance is “Il flauto delle vertebre” (“The Flute of the Backbone”), a single partial translation published by the poet Nelo Risi in the historic architecture journal *Domus* (1947). Lacking knowledge of Russian, Risi prepared the version in collaboration with the translator and futurist painter Giovanni Ketoff (1916–1968). Although incomplete, the text is of considerable interest, not least because few Italian poets have ventured into translating Russian verse, yet it largely went unnoticed. For Risi, who regarded translation as a relevant part of his poetic work, “Il flauto delle vertebre” is rooted in “romantic revolt and amorous despair”. In the commentary accompanying his translation, he defines the poem as “apocalyptic poetry yet already endowed with a concrete sense of life: the poet’s extraordinary ability to remain vivid and real even in his abstractions” (Risi 1947: 34).

Despite being the author of a poetry that is programmatically averse to emphasis and is “essentially non-metaphorical; a poetry in which the stated always prevails over the unstated, black over white, clarity over ambiguity” (Raboni 1977: XVI), Risi found Mayakovsky a congenial poet. One can observe, for instance, in lines 15–17, how Risi intensifies Mayakovsky’s verbal

¹³ Of the 102 poems anthologized in the first volume, only four constitute an exception in that they are translated in rhyme: *Voenno-morskaya lyubov* (Carnevali); *Skazka o krasnoi shapochke* (Carnevali); *Esh ananasy, ryabchikov zhui* (Carnevali); *Tuchkiny shtuchki* (Crino and Socrate). All four texts are epigrammatic or playful.

anaphora through alliteration, anaphora being the dominant figure in Risi's own poetry (Greppi 1995: 677):

Смех из глаз в глаза **лей**.
 Былыми свадьбами ночь **ряди**.
 Из тела в тело веселье **лейте**.
 Пусть не забудется ночь никем.

Versa da occhio a occhio il riso.
Vesti la notte delle antiche nozze.
Versate l'allegria da corpo a corpo
 e fate che il ricordo duri eterno.

(Risi 1947: 34)

(Laughter from eye to eye **pour**.
 The night with bygone weddings **deck**.
 From body to body merriment **pour**.
 Let the night be forgotten by no one.)

(**Pour** laughter from eye to eye.
Clothe the night in ancient weddings.
Pour merriment from body to body,
 and let the memory endure forever.)

Risi explicitly declared that he did not reproduce Mayakovsky's "verse fractures", arguing they "responded more to a need for diction ... than to a technical reform", and he sacrificed rhyme in order to "transpose into an adequate poetic language the extraordinary power of the images, the metaphors, the hyperboles, the alliterations, and the immediacy of certain popular words" (34). He recognised Mayakovsky's revolutionary poetic scope, which liberated poetry "from closed forms, from excessive caution, from overly calculated craftsmanship, from symbols emptied by use, in order to charge it with a courageous, anti-historical violence, animated by the powerful breath of fantasy" (36). And for him there was no contradiction between the avant-garde poet and the poet of the Revolution.

In 1966, Risi prepared a new version of the poem, titled "Sul flauto delle vertebre" ("On the Flute of the Backbone"), restoring it to its original unity. As he remarks in the note *Majakovskij prima della Rivoluzione*¹⁴ (Mayakovsky before the Revolution), which accompanies the text and largely reprises the 1947 commentary, this brings into sharper focus the persistence of Futurist elements, while also revealing a lingering connection to the earlier symbolist tradition. This translation remained unpublished; a later revision completed in 1984, "Il flauto di vertebre" ("The Backbone Flute"), was published only in the Nineties (Risi 1993; Majakovskij 1994b). Particularly notable in the final version, which did not receive critical attention, is the heightened emphasis on the religious theme, especially in the "Prologue" (Risi declared himself an atheist; moreover, he stated that the poet both implores and challenges God,

¹⁴ We were able to consult this document and the translation among the Scheiwiller papers at the APICE archive in Milan.

“an entity in which Mayakovsky did not believe”, Risi 1993: 94). By way of an example, we can cite lines 12–20, which preserve the previously noted verbal anaphora (“travasa”, “vesti”, “riversa”) while varying phonetic and semantic elements in pursuit of a more complex rendering (and without losing the hendecasyllables of the first version):

Память!
Собери у мозга в зале
любимых неисчерпаемые очереди.
Смех из глаз в глаза лей.
Былыми свадьбами ночь ряди.
Из тела в тело веселье лейте.
Пусть не забудется ночь никем.

(Memory!
Gather in the hall of the brain
The inexhaustible queues of the beloved.
Laughter from eye to eye pour.
The night with bygone weddings deck.
From body to body merriment pour.
Let the night be forgotten by no one.)

Memoria!
Raccogli nella **sala** del cervello
le **sembianze eterne** degli **amanti**.
Versa da occhio a occhio il riso.
Vesti la notte delle antiche nozze.
Versate l'allegria da corpo a corpo
e fate che il ricordo duri eterno.
(Risi 1947: 34)

(Memory!
Gather in the **hall** of the brain
The **eternal likenesses** of the **lovers**.
Pour laughter from eye to eye.
Clothe the night in ancient weddings.
Pour merriment from body to body,
and let the memory endure forever.)

Memoria!
sgrana nella **teca** del cervello
il **rosario** delle **elette**,
travasa da occhio a occhio il riso
vesti di nozze memorabili la notte
riversa l'allegria da corpo a corpo
e fa che il memorare duri eterno.
(Majakovskij 1994b: 123)

(Memory!
String out, in the brain's **reliquary**,
The **rosary** of the **chosen ones**,
Decant laughter from eye to eye,
Clothe the night in memorable weddings,
Pour merriment from body to body,
and let the remembrance endure forever.)

3.2 Angelo Maria Ripellino's work

The most influential 'poetic interpretation' was undoubtedly that of Angelo Maria Ripellino (1923–1978), himself a poet as well as a distinguished Slavist and translator¹⁵. He began engaging with Mayakovsky – “the poet who, more than any other, wounded my youth” (Ripellino 1968: 7) – as early as the 1940s¹⁶, but it was above all through the thirty-four translations included in the 1954 anthology *Poesia russa del Novecento*¹⁷ (*Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry*) that he advanced a new critical reading of Mayakovsky, one that departed both from the dominant orthodox Marxist interpretation and from the prewar readings¹⁸. While acknowledging the strong political dimension of Mayakovsky's verse, Ripellino emphasised the importance of the religious theme, largely neglected by Soviet criticism, and argued that even in his post-revolutionary work the poet “never renounced the formal achievements of Cubo-Futurism” (Ripellino 1954: LXVI). Such claims stood in stark contrast to the partisan reading prevailing at the time. Conversely, Ripellino also opposed those who criticised Mayakovsky from a right-wing perspective, insisting that “one does not find in him gratuitous praise of the Soviet regime, because communism was intrinsic to his nature” (Ripellino 1954: LXIX). The anthology's success helped establish Mayakovsky as a point of reference beyond the ranks of the PCI, for example for readers such as Eugenio Montale (1896–1981), one of the most important Italian poets of the 20th century, who reviewed the volume and thanked Ripellino for enabling him to rediscover Mayakovsky, “an Orpheus writing on a typewriter” (Montale 1955: 3) whom the “Lenin” found in 1940s translations had alienated from him.

Paradoxically, Ripellino's most decisive intervention in reinterpreting Mayakovsky came through his translation of “Lenin” (1967), the very text that

¹⁵ For an overview of Ripellino's work on Soviet poetry, see the recent study by Milani (2025).

¹⁶ To our knowledge, his first work on Mayakovsky was a brief note published in the pro-Soviet journal *La cultura sovietica* (Ripellino 1945). Two years later, in a monographic issue of the journal *La fiera letteraria* (1947, no. 16) entirely devoted to Soviet Russia, Ripellino authored no fewer than three contributions on Mayakovsky: one on the love poem “Pro eto” (“About This”), one on the formal features of his poetry, and one on the graphic aspects of his drawings and posters (Ripellino 1947a, 1947b, 1947c).

¹⁷ Both Ripellino's anthology and Poggioli's (1949) were reprinted multiple times in the decades following their publication, which shows their importance in the Italian reception of Russian early-20th-century poetry.

¹⁸ Ripellino also pursued this approach in the seminal book *Majakovskij e il teatro russo d'avanguardia* (*Mayakovsky and the Russian Avant-Garde Theatre*; Ripellino 1959), which, however, lies outside the scope of our analysis.

had hitherto served as the banner of the ideological reading. Commissioned by Einaudi for the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution, Ripellino's rendering differs considerably from the earlier versions of the poem. The contrast is already apparent in the introduction, where Ripellino drastically downplays the poem's importance, defining it as "the least vigorous and the most lacking in inventiveness and metaphors" (Majakovskij 1967a: 5) among Mayakovsky's long poems. More significantly, Ripellino stages an implicit polemic with his predecessors through the very nature of his translation. He declares that he sought "to render with equal noise the noise of Mayakovsky's text, its crashes and explosions... Without this exasperated magniloquence and vocality, very little of the poem would remain" (Majakovskij 1967a: 7). Consistently, and in open contrast to the translations by Zveteremich (1946) and De Micheli (1951), Ripellino's version places form at its centre: it abounds in sound play, alliteration, paronomasia, and both perfect and imperfect rhymes. Moreover, as has been observed (see Niero 2019: 185–244), many of the characteristic 'step-ladder' lines, when recomposed into single 'metrical' units, yield regular hendecasyllables, the principal meter of Italian poetic tradition. As an example of this strategy, consider lines 331–333 (see §2.2), where Ripellino not only preserves the original metaphor but also intensifies the lines' acoustic texture through multiple alliterations and the unmistakable rhythm of the Italian hendecasyllable (he adds the adverbial phrase "a tutto spiano" ("in full spate"), absent from the Russian text yet effective both rhythmically and stylistically):

Dai vessilli
di palpebre arrossate
lacrime di neve a tutto spiano.
(Majakovskij 1967a: 27).

(From the banners
of reddened eyelids
tears of snow in full spate.)

Considering that Ripellino was for a time closely associated with the circles of the so-called Italian *Neoavanguardia* (Neo-Avant-Garde; see Barberi Squarotti, Golfieri 1988), it is not surprising that his approach to translation was oriented precisely toward recovering the distinctly experimental dimension of Mayakovsky's poetry.

Ripellino's rereading and his effort to foreground the aesthetic qualities of Mayakovsky's verse even in overtly political texts became a crucial point of reference for subsequent scholars and poets. This influence extended not only to his pupils, Serena Vitale and Cesare De Michelis, who began their

work on Mayakovsky in the 1970s and carried forward their teacher's legacy (Majakovskij 1972a; Vitale 1979; Vitale 2015¹⁹; Lora Totino 1978; De Michelis 2009), but also to members of the *Neoavanguardia*²⁰. The latter were clearly inspired by Mayakovsky's oeuvre, which they regarded, in Edoardo Sanguineti's (1930–2010) words, as one of the “few existing examples of an art that is fully socialist” (Ajello 1964: 15) for those who pursued a revolution through the poetic forms. With one rather marginal exception²¹, however, they did not produce translations of his poetry and therefore fall outside the scope of our present study.

4. The third phase (1989–)

4.1 The Eighties

These thirty years of intense engagement with Mayakovsky were followed by a decade during which, with the ideological crisis of Soviet Stagnation, the Italian reception of Mayakovsky also stagnated, in the context of a generally limited editorial interest in Russian poetry²². In Italy the 1980s were marked by political disengagement (the so-called *riflusso*, or retreat), also in the literary field, which at the time saw the gradual emergence of postmodernism. By this point, the Neo-avant-garde experience had run its course: the poetic scene became increasingly fragmented, while the readership for poetry continued to shrink, eventually becoming marginal in the decades that followed. In this context, no new editions of Mayakovsky's poetry appeared between 1980 and 1988. A

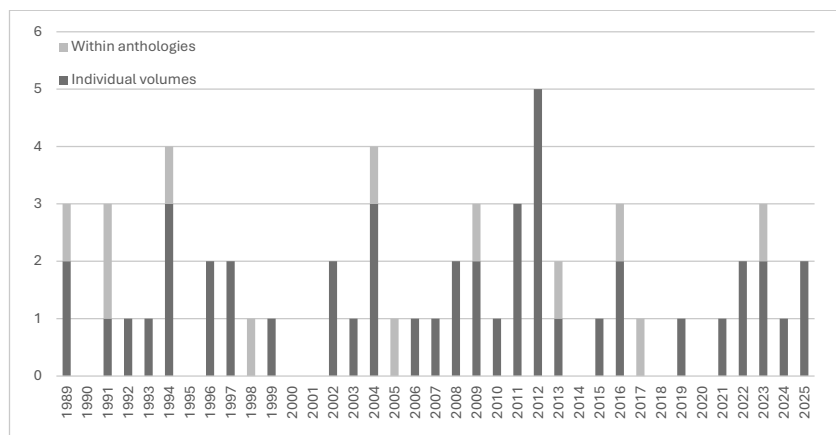
¹⁹ On the significance of this volume in promoting a new interpretative approach to translating Mayakovsky, see Calusio 2015: 50–53.

²⁰ One might think, for example, of Adriano Spatola's (1941–1988) poetry collection *Majakovskiiiiiiiij* (1971), of Sanguineti's 'step-ladder' verses, or of the RAI (state-owned Italian television) programme devoted to Mayakovsky, in which Elio Pagliarani (1927–2012) appears alongside Ripellino <https://www.raicultura.it/letteratura/articoli/2018/12/Vladimir-Majakovskij-e-il-futurismo-01ff89d5-a92c-4002-a63d-0453c4137a6f.html> (30.01.2026)

²¹ In 1969, in collaboration with the specialist in Russian literature Gabriella Schiaffino, the poet Antonio Porta (1935–1989) translated a minor text for children, “Kon Ogon” (“The Fire Horse”), “Il cavallino di fuoco” (see Majakovskij 1969, 2006).

²² Restricting ourselves to the poets of the early 20th century canon, throughout the 1980s there were no editions of Akhmatova's or Mandelstam's poetry, while Pasternak and Khlebnikov each saw a single new translation only at the very end of the decade. In contrast, some degree of success was enjoyed by the newly discovered Tsvetaeva together with Yesenin and Blok, whom Italian publishing had neglected only during the Fifties (see Niero 2023).

new, third phase continuing to the present and inaugurated by the post-ideological climate of the 1990s began in 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, when publications of Mayakovsky's poetry resumed and editions proliferated. Between 1989 and 2025, 59 new editions appeared, almost two-thirds of the total 96, comprising 47 individual volumes and 12 anthologies:



This sudden increase is partly explained by the broader expansion of Italian publishing during the period, which saw a general rise in output (see Vigni 2021: 37–63). In Mayakovsky's case, however, many translations were issued by small (or very small) publishers and thus had a limited impact, and reprints of old (or very old) translations outnumber genuinely new versions. Nevertheless, a fresh interpretative trajectory began to emerge that would gain momentum in the new century.

4.2 The translations of Giovanni Giudici

In May 1989 the major publisher Mondadori issued an anthology of Mayakovsky's poetry titled *A piena voce* (*At the Top of My Voice*). For the most part, the volume reprinted earlier translations, but it also included six new versions – totalling 440 lines – by the poet Giovanni Giudici (1924–2011), who, not knowing Russian, had previously collaborated with the editor of the volume, Giovanna Spindel, on translations of Russian poetry (most notably with his version of Pushkin's *Onegin*, first published in 1975). Although openly sympathetic to the PCI, Giudici did not foreground Mayakovsky's political dimension, which is in fact absent from his selection. Instead, he translated two poems from the strictly Futurist period, “*Za zhenshinoi*” (“Beyond a Woman”,

1913) and “Eshchy Peterburg” (“Again St Petersburg”, 1914), alongside two of Mayakovsky’s most celebrated love poems, “Lilichka” (1916) and “Pismo Tatyane Yakovlevoi” (“Letter to Tatyana Yakovleva”, 1928). The remaining two texts, “Proshchanie (Kafe)” (“Farewell (Cafè)”, 1925) and “Otvét na budu-shchie spletni” (“Answer to Future Gossip”, 1928), fall within the ironic and polemical, though not strictly political, vein of his poetry.

As is typical of both his poetic and translational practice, Giudici’s translations conceal an intense engagement with formal and stylistic features. When the graphic ‘step-ladder’ lines are recomposed as single ‘metrical’ lines, a clear pattern emerges, similar to that observed in Ripellino’s “Lenin”, in which the vast majority of these lines (206 out of 244) conform to the canonical meters of the Italian tradition. The hendecasyllable again predominates, accounting for nearly a third of the total. Its rhythm, echoed by frequent sub-multiples such as the *settenario* and *quinario*, resonates clearly across all the translations. Equally evident is Giudici’s attention to sonic texture, for example where he enriches the texts with frequent alliteration (see lines 11–12 of “Za zhenshinoi”: “dai marciapiedi con ammicchi malandrini | frecce spuntate insorsero gelose”, Majakovskij 1989a: 25). Many verses resonate through assonance or phonetic echoes at line endings (*suona : Roma, caffè : americana, favore : trilione*, etc.), while perfect rhymes occur only sporadically, often to highlight the ironic tone of certain passages. For instance, in the closing lines of “Eshchy Peterburg” – two hendecasyllables and an alexandrine – the playful rhyme that links the temporal adverb with the name of a great writer (*poi* (then): *Tolstoj*) is achieved through the insertion of a strong enjambement, absent from the Russian original:

За пятым навис шестой.

А с неба смотрела какая-то дрянь
Беличественно, как Лев Толстой.

(Over five loomed six.

And from the sky some kind of
filth was staring down,
Majestically, like Leo Tolstoy.)

Incombono le cinque e sono **poi**

le sei – ci sta a guardare dal cielo una canaglia
maestosamente come un Lev **Tolstoj**.

(Majakovskij 1989a: 39)

(Five o’clock looms, and **then**

It’s six – from the sky a scoundrel looks down
at us, Majestically, like a Leo **Tolstoy**.)

Although *A piena voce* was reissued in 1996 and 2004, and despite the prominence of both the translator and the publisher, these poetic versions, as did Risi’s, went largely unnoticed and failed to attract scholarly attention.

4.3 The Turn to Mayakovsky as a Love Poet among Slavists

In the same year, 1989, the publisher Marsilio printed a new translation of the prerevolutionary love poem “Oblako v shtanakh” (“A Cloud in Trousers”), edited by the Slavist Remo Faccani; a revised edition would later be published by Einaudi in 2012. This volume inaugurated a new trend in which the love poet – long eclipsed by the ‘political’ Mayakovsky – was rediscovered in his full aesthetic scope²³. Significantly, this renewed attention to Mayakovsky was driven primarily by academia, with versions produced by scholar-translators, a tendency that continues to this day. As evidenced by the richness and breadth of the paratextual apparatus, Faccani’s approach is essentially philological, though not aesthetically reductive. In a note accompanying the 2012 reissue, he explains that he did not pursue rhyme systematically, although it “plays a fundamental role” in the original, but rather allowed “isolated rhymes and assonances – which at times took shape spontaneously – to float within the flow of the translation” (Majakovskij 2012a: XXXIV). As for his models, Faccani acknowledges a primary debt to Ripellino, who had translated the poem in the 1954 anthology: “even though it contains some minor mistakes”, anyone who “decides to translate into Italian the masterpiece of the young Mayakovsky cannot avoid coming to terms with ‘Ripellino’s’ *Cloud*, nor ignore some of his felicitous solutions, which have by now become, in a sense, ‘classical’” (Majakovskij 2012a: XXXIV). Indeed, in certain passages Faccani’s solutions correspond verbatim to Ripellino’s (for example, “intronando l’universo con la possanza della mia voce”, l. 8, Ripellino 1954: 251; Majakovskij 1989b: 47), an explicit homage to a well-established translational model. What most distinctively characterises Faccani’s rendering, however, is his inventive handling of Mayakovsky’s neologisms. For example, the verb “iz”izdevayus” in line four, formed from the prefix *iz-* (implying abundance and completeness) and *izdevatsya* (to mock), is rendered by Faccani as the neologism “arcibefferò” (Majakovskij 1989b: 47), whereas Ripellino opts for the more analytical “schernirò a sazieta” (“I will mock to my heart’s content”, Ripellino 1954: 251). Similarly, the coinage “svylis” (a fusion of *vyt*, “to howl”, and *svit*, “to intertwine”), becomes the neologism “torciurlare” in Faccani (Majakovskij 1989b: 53), while Ripellino prefers the descriptive solution

²³ The turn toward the private sphere that characterised the 1980s brought the theme of love back to the forefront. In addition to Mayakovsky’s case, the late years of the decade saw the publication of two editions devoted to Yevtushenko (1986) and Pasternak (1988), both entitled *Poesie d’amore* (*Love Poems*), and both reprinted shortly thereafter (see Niero 2023).

“si sono attorcigliate con un urlo” (“they writhed together with a scream”, Ripellino 1954: 254).

From Faccani onward, this philological-aesthetic trend gained momentum. Between 1989 and the present no fewer than four new translations of *Oblako v shtanakh* have appeared (Majakovskij 1993, 2003, 2010; Majakovskij, Jasieński 2023), alongside two reissues (Majakovskij 2011c, 2012a). More broadly, anthologies entirely focused on – or particularly receptive to – the theme of love have proliferated, as attested by recent titles such as *Poesie d'amore e di rivoluzione* (*Poems of Love and Revolution*, Majakovskij 2012b), *Milioni di immensi amori puri: poesie d'amore 1913–1922* (*Millions of Pure, Immense Loves: Love Poems*, Majakovskij 2023b), *Bisogna strappare la gioia ai giorni futuri. Poesie per giovani innamorati* (*Joy Must be Wrested from the Days to Come: Poems for Young Lovers*, Majakovskij 2024).

The most refined expression of this recent tendency appears in two books edited by the Slavist Paola Ferretti for Einaudi, *Poesie d'amore* (Majakovskij 2023a) and *Di questo* (Majakovskij 2025a). Both volumes share a holistic conception of Mayakovsky's oeuvre, arguing that avant-garde, amorous, and political dimensions must finally be recomposed after decades of polarised reception into an integrated vision: “the fury of Mayakovsky the poet of love is inseparable from that of Mayakovsky the poet of the revolution. And the theme of love is par excellence the one in which he innovates and breaks with tradition” (Majakovskij 2023a: V). In terms of selection, *Poesie d'amore* includes 16 short poems and two long ones, *Fleita-pozvonochnik* and *Lyublyu* (I Love), while the 2025 edition is devoted entirely to *Pro eto*. Of Mayakovsky's “tetralogy of long love poems”, only *Oblako v shtanakh* is absent, since it already appears in Einaudi's catalogue in Remo Faccani's edition, which Ferretti praises as “admirable” (Majakovskij 2023a: VI). Faccani's work probably served as a model for Ferretti, not only in the shared ‘philological’ stance, evident in the extensive and precise commentary, but also in certain features of the translation itself. Like Faccani, Ferretti responds to Mayakovskian rhyme by resorting non-systematically²⁴ to assonances and phonetic echoes of various kinds (for instance, in the opening poem “Za zhenshinoi” the echoes between “nebbie” and “sghembe” in lines 1 and 3, “smorfiaccia” and “bisaccia” in lines 18 and 19, “costole” and “tegole” in line 20; Majakovskij 2023a: 5). A kinship with the strategy adopted by Faccani and before him by Ripellino can also be perceived in Ferretti's attention to sonic texture, which is aimed at reproducing the noisy phonetics of Mayakovsky's verse (from “About This”: “Spintonerà lo storpio al

²⁴ Only in “Voенно-morskaya lyubov” is rhyme pursued consistently (Majakovskij 2023a: 13).

foglio, | *imporrà: | – Raspa!*” ll. 20–23; “*Spappoli | pure i palmi tuoi, la trave*” ll. 40–41; Majakovskij 2025a: 4–5). A particularity of Ferretti’s translation, however, is represented by its special attention to the text’s metric structure, which often gravitates toward the hendecasyllable and the alexandrine, and is characterised by a clearly perceptible inclination toward iambic rhythm. A telling example is the final quatrain of “Lyubov” (1913), in which the free pattern of the Russian verse is regularised into the uniform iambic rhythm shared by three hendecasyllables (ll. 1, 3–4) and a thirteen-syllable line (2):

Бросьте города, глупые люди!	Lasciàte le città, voi <i>mentecàtti</i> :
Идите голые лить на солнцепеке	andàte a <i>mèscere</i> nel solleòne, nùdi,
пьяные вина в меха-груди,	vini ubriàchi dèntro pètti-òtri,
дождь-поцелуи в угли-щеки.	bàci-piovàsco sòpra guànçe-bràci.
	(Majakovskij 2023a: 7)

Lexical choices are where Ferretti most often diverges from the ‘translation tradition’ established by Ripellino and Faccani, favouring refined, literary solutions that can distance the Italian text from Mayakovsky’s abrasive, colloquial language (see Calusio 2024: 185). Again limiting ourselves to a few examples from “Za zhenshinoi”: the standard “tuchi” (clouds) is elevated to the sophisticated “cirri”, the commonplace “molitvy” (prayers) becomes the literary “preci”, choices that, while stylistically polished, sometimes soften the poet’s rougher register.

5. Conclusions

The outline sketched here in its fundamental contours shows that, in Italy, Mayakovsky’s poetry has been continually reshaped according to the prevailing horizon of expectations, each new wave of translations redefining his role within Italian culture. As we have shown, the early phase reveals a marginal and discontinuous reception, shaped by the incompatibility between Mayakovsky’s poetics and the dominant Hermetic paradigm (as well as between the poet’s political stances and the Italian Fascist regime). The second, postwar period shows an ideological canonisation in which translation strategies tended to privilege political content over formal and aesthetic complexity. Even though alternative interpretations were proposed by relevant actors in the field, the Soviet-aligned reading remained dominant for decades. The third, most recent phase is mainly characterised by a renewed attention to the lyrical dimension of Mayakovsky’s work, to the detriment of his political texts.

Much, however, remains to be investigated. First, a systematic survey of major Italian literary periodicals is essential, since journals often played a decisive role in disseminating foreign poetry (the 20th century has aptly been defined as “the century of journals”, Langella 1982). Second, the enquiry should be extended beyond national borders through a comparative perspective, examining how Mayakovsky’s Italian reception was linked to the circulation of his poetry (and of Russian poetry more generally) across Europe, particularly in France. Finally, as noted above, closer attention must be paid to versions produced by poet-translators (such as Risi, Ripellino, Porta, Giudici) as only by studying these versions can we fully understand how Mayakovsky’s verse entered the target literary polysystem and influenced contemporary Italian poetics.

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