Review of Valeria Tettamanti, *Il viaggio di Gulliver: Verso una (im)possibile cultura europea (1961–1963)*

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Reviews

Valeria Tettamanti, *Il viaggio di Gulliver: Verso una (im)possibile cultura europea (1961–1963)* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2021). 222 pp. ISBN 9788833643656

Valeria Tettamanti takes the project of the *Revue Internationale*, a journal edited by writers that was envisioned but never materialized, as a starting point for her essay about an '(im)possible European culture' entitled *Gulliver's travel*. Writing about the *Revue*, whose last working title was *Gulliver*, a name that none of the editorial board members was convinced by, is a tricky task not only because it involves three countries and their respective languages (it was due to be published simultaneously in Italy, France, and Germany), but also because it is both well known (thanks to its many famous editors) and at the same time poorly studied. The planning phase of the project — for which I will use the denominators *Gulliver* and *Revue Internationale* interchangeably — encompassed roughly two years, from early 1961 to spring 1963, when, after a reunion that was held to put together the first number, the editors decided to drop the project due to internal difficulties that had simmered for a while and seemed insurmountable in light of the proposed texts. That decision taken, the Italian editors set out to publish those texts destined for the first issue in a periodical directed by Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino, *Il Menabò* (Silvia Cavalli in recent years has worked a lot on this publication, publishing a monograph, an edition of letters that contains correspondence regarding *Gulliver*, as well as an article in *JEPS* about the *Revue Internationale*.[1] This special issue of *Menabò*, published in Italy in 1964, is the original source for the *Revue* and it is also the reason why the unfortunate working title of *Gulliver*,

used here for the first time, persists up until this day.

There are two other important sources, pivotal for any research on the aborted *Revue Internationale*, that were also special issues of periodicals. In 1990 the French periodical *Lignes* published an issue about Maurice Blanchot, accompanied by a dossier on the *Revue Internationale* which contained previously unpublished materials from the planning phase of the project: a small selection of letters along with some so-called 'preliminary texts' that had circulated among the editorial board members as memos or concept papers. This publication was edited by the director of *Lignes*, Michel Surya, and the Italian researcher Anna Panicali, presumably using materials given to them by Dionys Mascolo (without stating so). The other central publication appeared in the periodical *Riga*, was issued in Italy in 2003 and practically represents a translated and enhanced version of the French dossier published thirteen years prior, with additional critical essays, a few new letters (from Italian archives), and selected texts from the original *Menabò* issue, again edited by Panicali. These materials are the starting point for whoever finds themselves in the need to sum up the *Revue Internationale* in a few paragraphs, for no monograph has yet been written on the subject. However, while this selection of only thirty-eight letters (published in the 1990 and 2003 issues of *Lignes* and *Riga*, fruit of a French-Italian collaboration) is usually treated as *the* chronicle of the *Revue*, it is rarely considered that this is but a very small amount of the actual

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1   See Silvia Cavalli, ed., *'Il Menabò' di Elio Vittorini (1959–1967)* (Torino: Nino Aragno, 2016); Silvia Cavalli, *Progetto 'Menabò' (1959–1967)* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2017); Silvia Cavalli, 'An International "Non-Revue". Cultural Conflict and the Failure of *Gulliver* (1964)', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 3.1 (2018), 67–79.

correspondence exchanged between the twenty-one editorial board members and five publishing houses. The total number of letters averages around six to seven hundred.

There are a few other sources worth mentioning for the study of the *Revue Internationale*. In 2000 Marta Temperini edited a volume with *Gulliver* correspondence exchanged between Elio Vittorini and Francesco Leonetti, which is an important source, although it deals exclusively with an Italian exchange.[2] Furthermore there are two German books written by Roman Schmidt (2009) and Henning Marmulla (2011) that treat the project of the *Revue* quite thoroughly and take into account French and German archives.[3] However, their main concerns are respectively Maurice Blanchot and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, not the *Revue* itself. These studies are consulted only by those who read German. The same goes for a number of published correspondences (Ingeborg Bachmann/Enzensberger, 2018; Enzensberger/Uwe Johnson, 2009; Johnson/Siegfried Unseld, 1999) that may be of interest insofar as they contain letters concerning the project, but overall the interest in the *Revue Internationale* has been larger in Italy (and much smaller in France). What I try to point out is this: it is difficult to get a *full* picture of *Gulliver* without accurate source work and archival research or without paying close attention to each of the three languages involved.

With the above in mind, it is now an equally difficult task to write about Valeria Tettamanti's *Il viaggio di Gulliver* as it is to write about *Gulliver* without the necessary groundwork as a basis, because none of the above seems to be of any concern to Tettamanti, who does not problematize the sources that she uses. Her aim, instead, is 'to dwell

for the first time, from a critical-literary perspective, on the entirety of the texts of the "Menabò-Gulliver" and those concerning the project not intended for publication, such as the Correspondence and the Preparatory texts' ['soffermarmi, per la prima volta, in una prospettiva critico-letteraria, sull'integralità dei testi del "Menabò-Gulliver" e di quelli riguardanti il progetto non destinati alla pubblicazione, come le *Correspondances* e i *Textes préparatoires*'] (p. 19). It is true that the actual texts published in *Menabò* have received much less attention than the correspondence and internal circulars, and that the focus has been much more on the failure of the project than on what had been envisioned in the first place. There is, indeed, a necessity to fill this gap. Tettamanti furthermore wants 'to read the debate on the *Gulliver* project in the light of the literary productions and cultural positions of its main contributors, in particular those of Elio Vittorini, Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes' ['ci sembra inoltre opportuno leggere il dibattito sul progetto *Gulliver* alla luce delle produzioni letterarie e delle posizioni culturali dei suoi principali collaboratori, in particolare di quelle di Elio Vittorini, Maurice Blanchot e Roland Barthes'] (p. 21). She could have added Franco Fortini and Dionys Mascolo, whose work she also examines in the course of the book, but it would not alter the fact that the 'entirety' of her *Gulliver* corpus does not encompass German writing, or only to a very minor degree. That may be no news to *Gulliver* research, but this is the reason why it is difficult to review this book as a contribution to the sparse *Gulliver* canon, because with the two 1990 and 2003 special issues as a basis — a mere 38 out of an estimated 700 letters — she cannot but tread the beaten tracks that would need to

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2   See Marta Temperini, ed., *'Gulliver': Carte Vittorini e Leonetti in Europa Nel Sessanta* (Milano/Lecce: Editori di Comunicazione/Piero Manni, 2000).

3   See Roman Schmidt, *Die Unmögliche Gemeinschaft: Maurice Blanchot, Die Gruppe Der Rue Saint-Benoît Und Die Idee Einer Internationalen Zeitschrift Um 1960. Mit Einem Vorwort von Frank Berberich* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2009); Henning Marmulla, *Enzensbergers Kursbuch: Eine Zeitschrift Um 68*, 16 (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2011).

be revised before undertaking in-depth readings of the materials related to the project. The editions that she works with are not only dated and incomplete, but the biggest problem is that they were never conceived as scientific contributions. Those materials were published in periodicals with a totally different understanding of accuracy in treating their sources, which is acceptable in their context but needs to be considered when working with them.

I would like to illustrate the pitfalls of such an 'affirmative usage' with an example. In her introductory essay in *Riga*, Anna Panicali cites two sentences from a letter that Roland Barthes wrote to Jean-Louis Schefer on 30 March 1964, a full year after the *Gulliver* project had officially been abandoned. The letter is not part of any *Gulliver* corpus and we do not know where she got it from. Panicali simply refers to two lines where Barthes writes: 'with regards to the project [...] I feel an immense weariness, a definite weariness' ['dinanzi al progetto (…) provo una immensa stanchezza, una stanchezza definitiva'].[4] This 'tiredness', 'weariness', 'exhaustion' — **we do not know which French term he applied here**; the Italian 'stanchezza' can also mean physical as well as psychological exhaustion — **is** used by Tettamanti as the starting point for a reflection on Barthes's *Cours sur le Neutre* (held in 1977/78), in which *Fatigue* plays a crucial role. But that gives absolutely no insight into the story of *Gulliver*, though it might be an interesting contribution to the study of Barthes. Besides, a minor statement like this can hardly serve as a *pars pro toto* for the enterprise as a whole. Schefer himself was never part of the editorial group, but was friends with those involved in it, and Barthes's participation in the project was rather nominal, for he can by no means be considered a 'main contributor'. This is why in a 1979 interview on the *Revue* with Maria-Teresa

Padova, to which Tettamanti also refers, he insists on saying: 'I think I already told you the first time that I am a bad witness.' ['Je crois que je vous l'ai dit la première fois, je suis un mauvais témoin.']⁵

Tettamanti's essay consists of seven chapters in which she reflects on single aspects by confronting different texts from the *Revue*, such as Blanchot and Mascolo on community (pp. 29–53); Vittorini and Bachmann on 'claimed' and 'disavowed communism' ['fra un comunismo rivendicato e un comunismo sconfessato'] (pp. 53–67); two readings of Brecht, by Barthes and Fortini respectively (pp. 96–102); or Blanchot and Vittorini on the 'problem of collective *engagement*' (pp. 131–52), to name just a few. Her style is very allusive and she draws parallels between a wide array of texts that do not necessarily belong to the corpus sketched out in her introduction but can go as far as a 1975 novel by Michel Tournier or a text by Hans Robert Jauss from the late 1970s. In the *Acknowledgements* Tettamanti writes that her book is based on a Master's thesis submitted at a French university and as such it is a truly impressive work. But, in the altered context of an academic publication, the question does come to mind where this text is to be located. She uses the term 'essay' ['saggio'] and I think that is indeed more accurate than considering it as an academic monograph. Whilst she is very careful to provide Italian translations of the French quotes she uses in the text (up to the point of re-translating Barthes from the Italian of the *Menabò* publication back into her own French version), the choice she makes in the appendix is rather upsetting. There she reproduces, seemingly at random, four *Gulliver* letters in French, and in French only. It neither becomes apparent why those letters were chosen in lieu of different ones, nor why it is important to add them to the volume in the first place. She gives

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4   Quoted from Anna Panicali, ed., *'GULLIVER': Progetto di una rivista internazionale*, Riga Series, 11 (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2003), p. 52.
5   Roland Barthes and Maria-Teresa Padova, 'Vie et Mort Des Revues', in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), TOME V. 1977–1980, 774–81 (p. 778).

no indication as to where these four letters were extracted from (most probably *Lignes)*, thus reproducing the shortenings and corrections of Enzensberger's faulty French (in a letter to Mascolo) that the editors of *Lignes* had thought necessary to smoothen out, back in 1990.

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