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Attention and its Fringes in the Aesthetical Discourse (18th-21st Century)*

*Formes de l'attention:
L'attention et ses marges dans le discours esthétique (XVIIIe-XXIe siècles)*

Edited by Alberto Frigo

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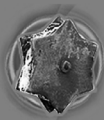
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“When the eye tired of observing rests”: Diffuse Attention in the Art and Writing of Medardo Rosso

Sharon Hecker

Abstract

This essay considers the possibility that in his blurry and hazy-looking artworks, Medardo Rosso tried to convey his experience of his creative process as not grounded in a moment of focused attention, but rather as a release into a more diffuse state of mind. I contend that this process of arriving at diffuse attention can best be understood through Rosso's idiosyncratic writings, hitherto unexplored. A relationship may be seen between his writing practice and the theories of his contemporary, the French philosopher, psychologist, and neurologist Pierre Janet.

Introduction

Why do the sculptures, photographs, and drawings of Medardo Rosso (1858-1928) appear so out of focus? Why are the subjects he represents so

difficult for viewers to see and perceive? Over the years, numerous answers have been proposed. They variously suggest links between Rosso's ideas and the optics of French Impressionist painting, his desire to capture in sculptural form the temporal fleetingness of modern life *à la* Baudelaire, or his attempt to render sculpture animated, mobile, and apparently "alive". Whatever the reason given, it is generally agreed that the physical and mental process of viewing Rosso's hazy, indistinct-looking art requires work, sustained effort, heightened attention and focused concentration on the part of a viewer.

This essay considers the possibility that Rosso may have been trying to convey his experience of his creative process as not grounded in a moment of focused attention, but rather as a release into a more diffuse state of mind. Such a process may have involved an alleviation of sharp focus that relaxes the artist's attention and allows something to emerge spontaneously. I contend that this process of arriving at diffuse attention can best be understood through Rosso's idiosyncratic writings, hitherto unexplored. A correlation may be made between his writing practice and the theories of his contemporary, the French philosopher, psychologist, and neurologist Pierre Janet who, in his widely acclaimed and read *L'Automatisme psychologique*, encouraged his patients to write in an automatic way in order to arrive at deeper and otherwise unreachable substrates¹.

1 Janet (1889). I thank Dr. Judith Hecker for her insights on Janet's theories and her generous editorial suggestions to this essay.

Rosso's unfocused writings echo Janet's theory of *abaissement du niveau mentale*, a lowered state of concentration and focus, a relaxation of rules and rational boundaries that permit uninhibited content to surface.

I. Diffuse Focus in Rosso's Sculptures, Photographs, and Drawings

There is perhaps no sculptor who took such a radical approach to the question of diffuse focus as



Medardo Rosso, *Enfant à la bouchée de pain*, 1892-97, bronze, Galleria degli Uffizi, Galleria d'arte moderna di Palazzo Pitti, Firenze

Rosso². His small heads of women, children, the sick and the elderly cast in plaster, wax, and bronze depict indistinctly rendered subjects that seem to be appearing and disappearing. Rosso extended these explorations to the idiosyncratic photographs he took of his sculptures, which further experiment with different levels of focus. For Rosso, the photographic process did not stop with shooting the image – it continued with his work in the darkroom, through developing his negatives and sometimes enlarging them in order to render their focus less sharp. In his photographs, his sculptures seem to be emerging from or disappearing into their blurry surroundings as much as into the material photographic plates upon which the artist developed his images. The odd ways in which he printed his photos, then subsequently rephotographed the prints and reprinted them differently each time, continued to engage with a visualization of diffuse focus³.

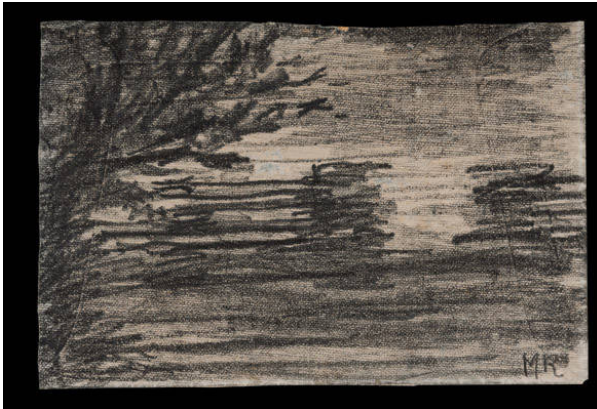
Medardo Rosso, *Ecce puer*, vintage photographs, private collection, c. 1911-14.



² For a critical biography of Rosso, see Hecker (2017).

³ See Taylor (2019).

Rosso extended his experimentation with focus in his idiosyncratic drawings. His small, mostly private sketches, often made on ripped or torn scraps of paper, backs of envelopes or hotel stationery, explore figures and objects that are coming in and out of focus, seeming to either emerge or fade away, especially when Rosso proceeded to photograph his drawings and print these photos in further creative ways.



Medardo Rosso, *Untitled Drawing*, n.d. Private Collection. Courtesy of: <https://www.marionegri.org/scritti-dell-artista/medardo-rosso/> Medardo Rosso, *Untitled Drawing*, n.d. pencil on paper, 13.5 x 9 cm Museo / Medardo Rosso, Barzio (Lecco), n.d., reproduced in: <http://www.iitaly.org/magazine/focus-in-italiano/arte-e-cultura/article/levoluzione-artistica-di-medardo-rosso-al-cima>

As Jodi Hauptman writes, his drawings favor "evocation over description"⁴ and, as with the sculptures and photographs, the viewer often has a hard time making out the subjects depicted.

II. The Question of Attention for Rosso

Whereas in his time, most critics linked Rosso's sculptures to the concept of the visual or optical "impression", in recent decades critics, curators, artists, and scholars have given more thought to understanding Rosso's project through different concepts of attention. For example, Francesca Bacci and David Melcher explain Rosso's ideas through the optical theories of central vs. peripheral vision⁵. Giovanni Lista and Nina Schallenberg see his goal as an attempt to "fix the ephemeral, the fleeting vision perceived"⁶. Others, such as the artist Luciano Fabro, read Rosso's project in more fluid terms, noting that while traditional sculpture "has been something [to which] you could add or subtract, Rosso settles these two questions by stressing and proving that when the eye walks along a thing, it adds and subtracts matter, adds and subtracts subject"⁷. Harry Cooper has suggested that Rosso's works always appear to be "losing form"⁸, but Matthew Witkovsky believes

⁴ Hauptman (2018).

⁵ See Bacci and Melcher (2003).

⁶ Schallenberg (2014). See also, among numerous other examples, Lista (2005).

⁷ Fabro (1997), p. 246.

⁸ Cooper (2003), p. 6.

that they register a more fluctuating “move in and out of form as we push our eyes over the surface of his works of art, whether these are sculptures or photographs”⁹. Most recently, Alex Potts has noted that Rosso’s works attempt to capture “the intangible living impression one had of a figure rather than its materialized shape or form [...] the visage in its moment of appearing to one became Rosso’s central concern in his sculpture—hovering there, beginning to take shape but never quite acquiring a recognizable identity”¹⁰.

Cooper described Rosso’s works as “objects our eyes have to crawl over”¹¹. This position is taken up again by both Witkovsky and Potts, who conclude that the act of looking at Rosso’s works requires immense effort, recalling the artist’s words that, “the first sensation you feel is quite different from the one you get when the eye tired of observing rests”¹². Witkovsky concludes that “we have to work” to see Rosso’s sculptures properly, “scrutiny, or quite simply, staring, is necessary to comprehension with Rosso’s sculptures: one strains to be sure of what one is looking at”¹³. Potts concurs that “seeing and feeling the overall impression the artist seeks to convey takes time and sustained effort”¹⁴. This

9 Witkovsky (2018), p. 68.

10 Potts (2021), p. 66.

11 Cooper (2003), p. 21.

12 The original version in French is: “Lorsque l’œil fatigué par une observation se repose”. I have translated it a little differently from in previous essays that use this quote, respecting the artist’s lack of punctuation and attempting to come closer to his own words. See Medardo Rosso, in Claris (1902).

13 *Ibidem*.

14 Potts (2021), p. 69.

fits with Fabro's idea that, as Witkovsky puts it, "perception and exhaustion are the wellspring of meaning in Rosso's sculpture"¹⁵.

Another way to consider this, I believe, is through the lens of diffuse attention. It is possible that in Rosso's art, the effort to look may actually not be about aspiring to a heightened or sharpened visual and perceptual attention, or a deeper effort of scrutiny and concentration, or an act of "crawling" or "pushing" our eyes over his forms to seek out the faces of his figures. The viewer may be asked instead to alleviate the effort of looking, thus allowing for a diffuse attention or focus out of which the form emerges. To my mind, a shift in the mode of attention from sharply focused to diffused can describe the artist's process, the image he seeks to convey to the viewer, as well as the way he asks the viewer to engage with his work.

This is aptly described by German critic Julius Meier-Graefe in his chapter dedicated to Rosso in his seminal *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Modernen Kunst* of 1904. His comparison of one of Rosso's small heads of a child to Rodin's Balzac is worth quoting at length:

Rosso's head is also a piece of human life, but here the same impression, the vitality of which startles us in the [work by] Rodin, is achieved by quieter means: the light does not leap from point to point as in the Balzac, but glides smoothly along. The great differences of plane are avoided and not, of course, merely because

¹⁵ Witkovsky (2018), p. 57.

of the difference of the model. What Rodin achieves with a keen incisiveness of touch, with depressions which slash the surface in every direction, Rosso arrives at by gradations which, if we see them aright, are even more impressive than the strong methods of the other, and allow of [sic] a relative peacefulness of surface which is very beneficent. It is a quieter art, of great distinction. Rosso's profiles of women and children are among the noblest things of our day. They belong of right to an age when we flee from the tumult of the world to secluded rooms, and in the gentle light of evening turn for refreshment all the more eagerly to such tender things because of the coarse interests which have absorbed the day. All the work of the earlier sculptors seems material beside that of Rosso, especially that of the vigorous, brutal artists of ancient Rome. Even the superficial demands this latter makes upon us are greater, entailing more effort both for our legs and our sensations; retreating to the right point of sight is fatiguing. A child's head by Rosso passes from hand to hand, and its gentleness seems rather to nestle into our emotions than to evoke them¹⁶.

Not only does Meier-Graefe capture the sense of diffuse attention that permeates Rosso's work, but he also apprehends the emotional response elicited from the viewer. This may be what Rosso intended when he wrote about the attenuated viewing conditions of his art: "when the eye tired of observing rests".

16 Meier-Graefe (1904), p. 22.

III. Diffuse Attention in Rosso's Writing

Rosso's process of letting go of focus can best be understood by observing his writings. Although he is known as a sculptor, his written production was significantly greater than his sculptural œuvre and outlasted his career as a sculptor. He continued to write in idiosyncratic ways for more than twenty years after he made his last new sculpture. Despite this fact, no complete collection of the original (rather than typed up) hundreds of letters, telegrams, and manifestos on art have ever been gathered to permit a comprehensive study of his textual œuvre¹⁷.

Though scholars on Rosso from his time until today often quote his words, not much in-depth consideration has been given to his textual production as an artistic statement in its own right and how it fits within his overall enterprise.

For the most part, art historians and critics have mined the artist's written output for content, using the texts as historical documents. They have lifted what appear to be remarkable phrases to use either as anecdotal vignettes reflecting Rosso's bohemian personality, or as aphorisms in support of his sculptural or photographic projects.

This eagerness to get at the meaning of Rosso's words has led to a splitting off of the contents of the texts from their idiosyncratic visual forms. Except

17 Several publications contain printed selections of Rosso's writings, often with some errors in transcription, and some reproduce a few images of letters. See, among others, Fezzi (1994), pp. 57–59; Lista (1994); Fagioli and Minunno (1993); Guidici (2003). See also Celli (1998–1999).

Milano 27 Aprile 1883

Carpenter L. L.

Qual effetto mi abbia fatto l'istituzione
del ~~figlio~~ ^{figlio} di Craxi non lo posso nemmeno
dichiarare per l'illustrazione della
quale posso per ora essere esente
ad un tale di fatto questa
ora che io non saprei esprimere
il piacere di conoscerlo che mi
fuore a che forse emigrare
e non a che da tanti anni per
ottenere da fuori molti del suo
giornale. Oh io mi sento una
cosa bella che mi ha fatto un
dover all'opera del mondo. Ho
e compreso il piacere che ho
fatto in quel momento non
che lo saprei esprimere per
canta ballate per diletto
assai lo studio e l'opera

Lo ricordo ancora proprio bene
a tempo - Petrosi di due
giorni che potrà laurearsi
l'ammiratore -

Sono qui al Hotel
ora a me dunque
La cui anima è
non ho avuto
lavoro da pensare
to l'immaginazione
Poi ho avuto
a commentare il suo
Sapete tutti che ho
e molto da dire
a tutti

1892

Caro Paolo

Come vuoi che
pensi che te mi
dimentichi -

Mai

Me sti giorni
vado ando a loggia
qui -

Di diso dopo dare
materialmente per
posta caro =

Medardo Rosso, Part of a letter to Baldassare Surdi, 27 April 1883, reproduced in: Margaret Scolari Barr, *Medardo Rosso*, p. 80.

Medardo Rosso, Letter to Louis Piérard, 1912, priv. coll. reproduced in: Lista, *Medardo Rosso Destin d'un sculpteur*, p. 149.

Medardo Rosso, Part of a letter written in the 1920s to Paola Consolo, reproduced in: Margaret Scolari Barr, *Medardo Rosso*, p. 80.

for rare instances, this has involved an involuntary "cleaning up" of the irregular language, correction of spelling, word order, and punctuation to improve legibility, focus, and clarity. The neatly typed texts in publications do not do justice to the diffuse visual manner in which Rosso often covered his pages with words, nor do they convey the various kinds of handwriting found even within a single text. Translations further normalize Rosso's peculiar use of multiple languages and different dialect in the same text. The writings become more logical, legible, and clear, but their quirkiness—and especially the way the writing becomes part of Rosso's artistic project—are lost.

A more careful examination of Rosso's letters in their original visual forms suggests that his writing developed in ways that emphasized the opposite: a diffusion of punctuation, sequence, focus, and organization. Only a handful of people intuited the meaning of this unusual approach during his lifetime and after his death. In 1913, Rosso's friend the French Symbolist poet Jehan Rictus exclaimed in his diary that a letter he had just received from Rosso was "a masterpiece of incoherence"¹⁸. In her 1963 monograph, Margaret Scolari Barr observed that

[Rosso] sent streams of telegrams and wrote atrociously illegible letters scattered with single words in huge miniscules [i.e. lower-case letters] centered on the page, inscrutable

18 "Lettres: l'une de Rosso: absolument incompréhensible, un chef d'oeuvre d'incohérence...", Rictus (1898–1933), entry dated Friday 22 May 1914 38v.

allusions, indictments, proclamations in mixed languages, multiple postscripts, re-salutations, and embraces which rival in free-association, though not in poetic content, the writings of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce¹⁹.

More recently, in their monographic studies of Rosso, art historians Jole de Sanna and Marco Fagioli have suggested the need to study the artist's writings as avant-garde gestures equal in importance to his sculptures²⁰.

IV. Rosso's Early vs. Later Writings

It is important to realize that Rosso's writings were very different early in his career. Contrary to the romanticization of Rosso as a rebel, antagonistic to all order and structure from the start of his career, his early letters indicate his upbringing in a proper bourgeois family. They emphasize his schooling, at least up to secondary school, and a heightened concern with correct formal Italian language²¹. Even to those familiar with his writings, it may come as a surprise that Rosso did not experiment with writing during his early Milanese years in the 1880s. His few surviving texts from the first half of the 1880s are conventional²². They appear neatly written, logically

19 Scolari Barr (1963), p. 65.

20 De Sanna (1985), pp. 91-93; Fagioli (1993), pp. 22-23. For another opinion, Caramel (1979), p. 65.

21 *Ibidem*, pp. 19-20, 108-110ff.

22 See, for example, his letter to Baldassare Surdi, reprinted in Scolari Barr (1963),

composed and orderly (even in the event that he did not personally write them, he seemed concerned that they should seem conventionally appropriate). It is quite possible, however, that he wrote them himself, since in his youth, he had won a prize for best handwriting in school. The letters show that the lines are straight, the calligraphy is elegant, and the contents are well-organized²³. The date is affixed at the top and a signature is at the bottom, all as per proper convention.

A marked shift in Rosso's written language occurred in 1889, when he moved to Paris on the advice of his friend, the Milanese literary critic Felice Cameroni. The transformation in his letters to Cameroni is noteworthy: the handwriting gradually becomes looser, the sentences begin to falter in grammatical coherence, the phrases turn repetitive, and both form and content seem to lose their logical order and focus. It is as if Rosso "forgot" how to write correctly. This is especially odd if we consider that Cameroni, Rosso's interlocutor, was a sophisticated writer, a friend of Zola and de Goncourt and the first translator of Zola into Italian²⁴. The shift has yet to be explained.

Over the next thirty years in Paris, Rosso's writings became increasingly difficult to decipher. In some, the syntax is so garbled that the texts are only

p. 80. On the Brera petition, see Hecker (2000).

²³ On the calligraphy prize, see Hecker (2017), pp. 10 and 221, notes 22, 23.

²⁴ See their correspondence: Rosso – Cameroni (1889 giugno – 1892),. Some of the letters have been published. For a listing of published letters in this series, see Hecker (2015), pp. 143–54. The unusual nature of Rosso's writings to Cameroni is noted by De Sanna (1985), p. 92.

partly comprehensible. In others the handwriting can barely be made out, for Rosso sometimes crisscrossed the lines, at times superimposing one line on top of another. Additionally, he began to write in an odd mixture of languages—a blend of Italian, pidgin French, and Piedmontese and Lombard dialects that further bring readability in and out of focus. Text dissolves and comes back in an ebb and flow of coherent, orderly thoughts mixed with irregular, multilingual, repetitive streams of written thinking traced on paper. As Rictus noted several times in his diary: “Received letter from Rosso who has the specialty of sending me extraordinary letters”²⁵. On another occasion, he became frustrated: “a word from Rosso. Indecipherable scribble. It is a grid: it is not a letter”²⁶.

V. Interpreting Rosso's Writings

Perhaps because of a desire to preserve the myth of Rosso as the bohemian rebel from the start of his career, many who have studied Rosso have disregarded the shift in his writing after his arrival in Paris. The presence of the early texts undermines the belief that his engagement with his writing as an artistic form was a constant in his life, or an inherent

25 “Reçu lettre de Rosso qui a la spécialité de m’envoyer des lettres extraordinaires”, Rictus (1898–1933), entry dated Tuesday 28 April 1903.

26 “Mot de Rosso. Gribouillage indéchiffrable. C’est un quadrillage: ce n’est pas une lettre”, Rictus (1898–1933) entry dated Thursday 12 December 1918, 97v. Transcribed in part but misdated by Lista (1994), p. 67.

or inevitable product of his eccentric personality from the very start of his career. The properness of the early texts and Rosso's schooling make it difficult to justify assertions, such as those of Rosso's Dutch patroness Etha Fles or the Italian author Elda Fezzi, that the artist was throughout his life a primitive genius who simply did not know how to write²⁷.

Scolari Barr, who was the first author to note a change from the early to the late letters, presented an equally problematic interpretation. In examining two letters, one from 1883 and another from the 1920s, she puzzled over the fact that the script began as "small, wiry, and neat, the lines straight and evenly separated"²⁸, but in later years became "larger, wildly irregular, full of scratched-out letters or words, often illegible"²⁹. This change, she said, paralleled a shift in Rosso's flow of thought, which had begun in the 1880s as "colloquial but not illogical"³⁰, and later became "disconnected, repetitious, full of mental short cuts, obscure allusions, and returns to previous ideas"³¹. She concluded that the transformation happened because of a sudden neurological trauma caused by a fall from a tram. However, since Rosso's letters to Cameroni from Paris date to 1889, and the fall occurred much later, in 1902, one cannot agree.

Scolari Barr believed that the 1902 fall injured Rosso's head and impaired his judgment. Her

27 Fles (1922), p. 43. Fles wrote that Rosso never opened a book, and wrote as he spoke. Fezzi believed he did not possess the skills to write well, see Fezzi (1994), pp. 57–59.

28 Scolari Barr (1963), p. 80.

29 *Ibidem*.

30 *Ibidem*.

31 *Ibidem*.

framing of Rosso pathologically, in terms of mental infirmity, resembles the explanation of supposed insanity—currently under question—that scholars have traditionally used to justify Vincent van Gogh’s artistic choices. Although Scolari Barr supported her observations with the two letters she reproduced in her book, the many other letters that have since come to light from before 1902 clearly show that Rosso’s odd writings were deliberate acts, rather than the products of a neural injury. Some letters penned very late in his life—and intended to be clear—are legible and articulate enough to be understood. It becomes evident that the letters were being consciously used by Rosso for artistic purposes.

The interpretations of Rosso as primitive, illiterate bohemian or mentally injured provide interesting insights. It is true that, as scholars have noted, after 1889, Rosso began to incorporate his quirky language as part of his “trademark” identity, which de Sanna defined as a form of avant-garde artistic gesturing. It is also true that Rosso’s post-1889 writings from Paris have a primitive, unrefined, childlike quality to their language and that the disoriented, unfocused nature of the texts resembles a kind of “woundedness” to the mental faculties of the writer. Yet rather than reading them only as a personal eccentricity or a state of mental or physical injury, one might examine Rosso’s writings as part of a letting go of proper rules to reach a kind of diffuse state of attention, tracing the process as it unfolds, and attempting to convey it to the reader.

That Rosso’s manner of writing was intentional

and that he resisted any external attempts to interrupt his flow can be glimpsed through accounts by his friends. In 1907, Rictus wrote in his diary that Rosso came to his house to ask him for help writing a letter to Georges Clemenceau:

And here I go to make a letter in this sense, a telegram letter. What a pain! Rosso wants to introduce his terrible gibberish: on several occasions I refuse to do so and even get carried away by his rage at wanting to pepper the letter with French mistakes. Finally after 4 copies, he seems happy and manages to understand what he wants me to say, I say it in clear and known style. He then settles down to copy it, it's a job for him: he's sweating and I dread a bloodbath watching his big purple neck bent over the paper. Finally it is me who writes the envelope and he leaves, but it took from 10.30 to 1 in the afternoon³².

We find a similar story in the late years of Rosso's life back in Italy, when he was focusing all his energies on composing personal manifestos about art and pleading—mostly unsuccessfully—with newspaper editors to have them published. In a recollection from the autobiography of the Futurist painter Carlo Carrà, we see how Rosso's writing process unfolded. When Carrà arrived at Rosso's hotel in Milan one day in the late 1920s, he found the sculptor surrounded by

³² "Et me voilà parti à a faire une lettre dans ce sens, une lettre télégramme. Que de peines! Rosso veut y introduire son terrible baragouin: à plusieurs reprises je m'y refuse et même m'empporte contre sa rage de vouloir émailler la lettre des fautes de français. Enfin après 4 copies, il semble content et parvient à

hundreds of white sheets of paper on the floor with two or three lines on each. “[Rosso] said hello to me while continuing to work, but after a few moments he stopped and said: ‘Nom de Dieu, anche stavolta ho sbaglià’ [Name of God, I made a mistake again] and he ripped the page from the roll”³³. Carrà further recalled Rosso reading another finished text aloud. When Carrà made a few suggestions for changes, the sculptor immediately rejected them, claiming that they would have disturbed the natural flow of his text. Thus, Rosso resisted external intervention that would correct, improve, or alter the idiosyncratic nature of his writings once it had emerged. It was only thanks to Carrà’s intervention with the newspaper editor of the daily *L’Ambrosiano* that the strange article was published (Rosso promptly requested 7,000 copies of the newspaper!)³⁴. From both these anecdotes, we can see that Rosso was working hard to convey his meaning to his audience, but with great difficulty, and no matter how hard he worked, his writings remained largely opaque and unintelligible. This is how the contemporary sculptor Juan Muñoz imagined Rosso’s process of writing when he wrote: “As he progresses writing and looks back over what is written, he intuitively feels that there are more incomprehensible phrases than ones

comprendre ce qu’il veut que je dise, je le dis en style clair et concis. Il s’installe pour recopier à son tour, c’est pour lui un travail: il sue et je redoute un coup de sang à observer sa grosse nuque empourprée penché sur le papier. Finalement c’est moi qui écrit l’enveloppe et il s’en va, mais cela a pris de 10h ½ à 1 heure de l’après midi”, Rictus (1898–1933), entry dated Friday 6 September 1907, 89r.

³³ Carrà (1981), pp. 161–163. See also Carrà (1985).

³⁴ *Ibidem*. See Rosso (1926).

he can decipher"³⁵.

VI. Janet's Theories and Diffuse Attention in Rosso

What might have prompted Rosso to begin to write in this diffuse manner after arriving in Paris in 1889? One answer may come from the history of medicine and psychiatry, specifically the work of Pierre Janet. Long-forgotten, Janet's name and achievements have only recently been recovered, but he was a contemporary of Rosso's, and his *L'Automatisme psychologique* was published in 1889, the same year Rosso moved to Paris. Janet was the disciple of philosopher Théodule Ribot, who had introduced Spencerian theories to the French public and applied them to the study of the mind and its "dissolution" (following Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours and John Hughlings Jackson). He was a friend of Henri Bergson at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris where he studied, and a student of neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière, who became famous for his "scientific discovery" of hysteria, and where Janet became interested in the processes tied to hysterical states.

Janet believed that the human mind struggled between forces of synthesis and automatism, or unity and disintegration. He urged patients to write in an "automatic" manner, presenting his work on

³⁵ Muñoz (1997).

“automatic writing” and making a claim for a form of intelligence in seemingly unconscious states. Janet called this state of diffusion an *abaissement du niveau mentale*. He spoke of his patients under this condition as “living statues”³⁶. His principal claim, the weakening of supreme conscious control, would be most seriously developed by Carl Jung, who believed that reduction of attention could also be caused by fatigue, sleep, intoxication, fever, anemia, intense affects, shocks, or disease. As per Jung, this state led to an incapacity for clear ideation—ideas became indistinct, no proper differentiation occurred, leading to confusions, condensations, repetitions, and metaphors.

There is as yet no systematic study of Janet’s immediate reception outside his field, in French cultural circles, and his influence on creative figures such as artists and writers. This influence was probably far greater than is currently known. His impact on authors of modern fiction, such as Marcel Proust, is only now being recognized³⁷. Likewise it has recently been argued that Surrealist artist André Breton relied heavily on Janet’s ideas for his “discovery” of automatic writing without, however, publicly crediting Janet’s book³⁸. I believe that Janet’s ideas may have been of interest to Rosso, either directly or indirectly. It is noteworthy that Janet’s book on automatic writing appeared in the same year that Rosso moved to Paris and presumably

36 See Craparo, Cocco Ortu and van der Hart (2019); Ellenberger (1970).

37 For the influence of Janet on literary works, see Pérez-Rincón (2008); Johnson (2005); Bizub (2006); Cotsell (2005).

38 Breton’s knowledge of Janet’s *L’Automatisme psychologique*, despite his

Janet's ideas were widely discussed among French intelligentsia and in the press over the following years. The book was republished many times in at least ten editions³⁹. Janet's ideas took such hold in the popular imagination that they were even caricatured in the press.



Vignette from Jacques-Sourniau, «Le-Rictus», 1912.

systematic failure to acknowledge it publicly, is evident in his comment to Philippe Soupault, who wrote that Breton “made me see that ‘the mind disengaged from all critical pressure and scholarly habits presented with images, not logical propositions’ and he told me that if we agreed to adopt what the psychiatrist [sic] Pierre Janet had called automatic writing, we might produce texts which enable us to describe an unexplored universe”. See Soupault (1967), pp. 664-665 and Soupault (1968), pp. 475-476 cited in Bacopulos-Viau (2012).

³⁹ By 1907, Janet's *L'automatisme psychologique; essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine* had been published in its tenth edition and continued to be republished with regularity for decades, confirming its wide readership.

It might seem odd that an Italian sculptor-emigré such as Rosso would have known of Janet's work. However, one should consider the fact that another neurologist, and the favorite disciple of Charcot, Joseph Babinski, was in contact with Rosso in this decade, since he is listed as the owner of a work by Rosso, as is Dr. Jean Darier, Babinski's close friend and colleague.

Rosso's ideas developed during a historical period in which similar concepts about language were floating in advanced intellectual circles. Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* (1897) is an early example of a visual play with linguistic form made to mirror content, and Rosso was close to late Symbolist poets such as Rictus and Charles Morice. But his autobiographical reticence allows us no direct access to what, if anything, might have influenced him.

It is tempting, finally, to see in Rosso's writings, as Scolari Barr suggested, early seeds of Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *parole in libertà* ("words in freedom") inaugurated in 1913–1914. Marinetti was aware of Rosso and praised him publicly and privately. We hear echoes of Rosso in Marinetti's *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, in which the latter advocated the random scattering of nouns, the replacement of the old indicative with elastic infinitives, the annihilation of punctuation and "foolish pauses made by commas and full stops"⁴⁰, and the abandonment of "the so-called typographic harmony of the page"⁴¹ in favor of free, expressive

⁴⁰ Marinetti (1912).

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

orthography. One thinks of collage, Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, De Stijl, and Bauhaus as the far-reaching developments of such thought in the twentieth century.

Yet Rosso avoided connections with Futurism, which prevented his smooth insertion into the history of modern Italian art. He publicly objected to any suggestion that Futurism developed from his art by snubbing Marinetti and Boccioni as charlatans, despite the fact that the Futurists hailed him as their greatest predecessor. Unlike the Futurists, in his writing Rosso chose to trace states of verbal dissolution rather than replacing old linguistic laws with new ones. He thus avoided the gimmickry, the high-brow wittiness, and the programmatic output of the Futurist production. Rosso distanced himself from Futurism's artistic mastery or clever formal play. Instead, his writing emphasized a highly personalized lack of formalized convention, homogeneity and organization. In escaping the objectification of forms and formulas, Rosso's project remained unusually open to his own mental schemas that allowed the frustrating human values of repetition, anomaly, error, and accident into the space of artistic representation. He was uninterested in playing with the new mechanization of modern typography or its associations with technology, speed, and efficiency, all of which the Futurists worshipped. Instead, he placed artisan-like value upon his own peculiarly incomprehensible, disjointed thoughts, and his hand's irregular physical traces on the page.

If Rosso's writings have been characterized as disorganized, nonsensical, repetitive, "primitive", childlike, or "wounded", they also suggest a rich, multilingual, and typically Rossian gamut of diffuse states of attention. They contradict the Futurist credo of de-emotionalizing and depersonalizing human experience. Not by chance, Rosso frequently adopted the intimate idiom of the personal letter, and most of his public manifestos were addressed to someone in particular. It was as if he was trying to make his experience, mostly incomprehensible, understood as is to his recipients and viewers. As in his sculptures, this was Rosso's way of showing what diffuse attention looked and felt like to him.

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