

Eiffel flower

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Bruno Corra

SAM DUNN IS DEAD

Translated and introduced by John Walker
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For the past three decades the London-based Atlas Press has been publishing a succession of experimental texts from what their website calls the “anti-tradition ... a somewhat less crabbed and liverish version of the avant-gardes of the last 150 years”. Their latest publication is a real find – a very short novella never before available in English that will appeal to anyone with an interest in early Modernism and the origins of Surrealism. *Sam Dunn Is Dead* was written in 1914 and the First World War, though never explicitly mentioned, is a constant backdrop: “The old, material appearances were fading away. In the world of men, craters of unpredictability were opening up”. While literal craters were to be found in the battlefields of Flanders, the author’s interest lies in the metaphysical breach between reality and the unknown.

Bruno Corra was the pseudonym of Bruno Ginanni Corradini (1892–1976). He was for a time connected with the Futurist movement, and *Sam Dunn è morto* was first published by the movement’s founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s Edizioni Futuriste. It has long been out of print in Italy and is virtually unknown beyond scholars of Futurism. The publishers’ claim that it is a forgotten masterpiece is not unreasonable, although Corra is (as George Melly once described the Belgian surrealist E.

L. T. Mesens) “a figure of major minorness”.

Sam Dunn is, despite his English name, a Parisian poet, a languid occultist who somehow unleashes a surreal apocalypse on the city ten years before the appearance of the first Surrealist manifesto. Picture *The Waste Land* filmed by Georges Méliès: showers of fresh eggs fall on Rodin’s monument to Victor Hugo; a monstrous asparagus springs up beneath the Arc de Triomphe. Nature is accelerated, radically repurposed, mechanized:

All the trees in the forest of Fontainebleau vanished in an instant as if the earth had swallowed them up; at the same time, with a deafening crack, the Eiffel Tower *sprouted* like a shrub from its base to the summit: the iron shook, vibrated, splintered, threw out a hundred enormous branches, and from these sprang metal

leaves in groups, arranged in the shape of a fan with gold, silver and nickel-plated flowers.

These events are part of “a colossal vortex of capricious energy” that occurs “at five twenty-seven in the afternoon on the fifth day of June” at some point in the then futurist 1950s. Temporal blurring is a typically modernist strategy and it is seldom clear precisely when things take place. There are sudden violent reversals, startling discontinuities and fragmentations, the breakneck farce interrupted by slower, contemplative passages in what the author called his “synthetic” style, eliminating all superfluity. There is also a heavy reliance on bottom jokes, not least during the final apocalyptic crescendo:

a gentleman of about 44, a serious, bearded man, vigorously pinched the posterior of a woman who happened to be near him. *A quarter of an hour later there was no individual in the whole of Paris who could conceive of, or perform, any action other than that.*

After the overthrow of Paris we switch to Italy’s Ligurian coast and the bizarre Hotel Portorosa, “the world’s least vertical structure”, built by Cavaliere Angelo Santerni, Dunn’s nemesis. What follows makes very

little sense but is consistently entertaining and, at times, disquieting.

Corra severed links with Futurism after the Great War and went on to write many popular novels for a mainstream readership. He considered *Sam Dunn Is Dead* a failure, an inadequate response to the great upheavals of the time, but his writing is weirdly prescient in its focus on the mob, anticipating Elias Canetti’s study *Crowds and Power* (1960).

This very slim volume, beautifully produced, impeccably edited and translated by John Walker, has illustrations taken from the second edition (1917) by Rosa Rosà, the feminist author of *Una donna con tre anime* (1918) and *L’altro romanzo futurista che scrisse è non c’è che te!* (1919). Neither of these has yet appeared in English and I can’t help feeling they should: if nothing else they might serve to counter the chronic blokeishness of much Futurist writing, which – with its macho posturing and emphasis on speed and technology and machines and urban modernity – make it the *Top Gear* of the avant-garde. A low-key appendix includes the author’s foreword to the fifth edition of 1928, in which he appears to support the Fascist cause:

The Fascist will . . . does it not desire clarity, order, constructive solidarity, human warmth and adherence to the basic immutable laws of life and creation?