

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 47
Issue 1 *Centering Black Cultural Production in Translation*

Article 16

2023

Guido Mazzoni. *On Modern Poetry*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Belknap Press, 2022.

Anthony DeGenaro
Ohio Dominican University, degenara@ohiodominican.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), [Latin American Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Spanish Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

DeGenaro, Anthony (2023) "Guido Mazzoni. *On Modern Poetry*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Belknap Press, 2022.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2271>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Guido Mazzoni. *On Modern Poetry*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Belknap Press, 2022.

Abstract

Review of Guido Mazzoni. *On Modern Poetry*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Belknap Press, 2022. 294 pp.

Keywords

poetry, genre analysis, modern poetry, modern literature, Italian literature

Guido Mazzoni. *On Modern Poetry*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Belknap Press, 2022. 294 pp.

Zakiya Hanafi's thoughtful translation of Guido Mazzoni's *On Modern Poetry* (2022) opens with Theodor Adorno: "the forms of art register the history of humanity with more justice than do historical documents" (x). This looming epigraph establishes the high stakes of this thorough analysis of culture and its history, craft and its permutations, and "the topography of genre." Mazzoni presents a counter-narrative on the history of poetics from the lyric's origins in oral traditions to the genre shifting of modern lyric as we recognize it today; *On Modern Poetry* is the result of this alternative perspective on history. Mazzoni studies and analyzes meter, syntax, lexicon, and tropes/figures, reading them in the development of lyric and poetry across poetic epochs (ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, Classicist, and New Romantic). Ultimately, Mazzoni anthropologizes modern poetry as arrogant expressivism. As a site for encounters with the outside world, contemporary poetry stands firmly in the realm of subjective, particularly in lyric forms, which only appeal to local contexts and audiences. Returning to his epigraph, Mazzoni concludes: "the forms of art tell the history of humanity with greater accuracy than do historical documents" (237).

Whether this history is an egocentric reflection of our subjective experiences, a critique of the alienation of modern culture, or a response to a flawed genre incapable of shedding its historical roots in what Aristotle describes in *Poetics* as "true mimesis," what is clear is the depth of *On Modern Poetry*'s close reading and thick description of its historical work, often characterized by Mazzoni as topography of genres, anthropology, or tracing of paradigmatic shifts. What is less clear is the affective response to the lineage-building *On Modern Poetry* makes. Should readers of this text merely observe and reflect on these changes, or should readers revolt against lyric poetry, embracing classical theories of style and rejecting modern literature?

All the same, Hanafi's translation does great justice to both the author's (at times) inscrutable theorizing and the intimidating bibliography of, as Hanafi notes, "foreign-language works" which were meticulously translated. However, some texts remain in their original language, a sign of great care Hanafi takes in honoring the artistic intent of those poetic works, depending on the context of Mazzoni's use of these texts. For example, in *On Modern Poetry*'s analysis of syntax, Hanafi offers the terse "sun slit throat" in translation of "Soleil cou coupé" (139) which could just as well read "let the sun beheaded be" or translated as the euphemism "murderess" or the even more crass "murder-hole." These translation choices add a real depth to the scholarship for English-reading audiences of this second edition, broadening access to Mazzoni's 2005 Italian-language original *Sulla poesia moderna*.

On Modern Poetry is organized into six sections, which Mazzoni, engaged in literary criticism masquerading as history, more or less develops chronologically. In the introduction, Mazzoni discusses models for a history of culture to frame complications in his approach, namely, cultural historians' tendencies to fetishize, unify, or hegemonize the historical epochs they study. Mazzoni offers "A History of Concepts" and key historical moments for understanding them. The third chapter, "A History of Forms," offers a focus on the craft of poetry and poetics, even from this historical and theoretical lens, and might have the most applications for a reader in a poetry writing workshop as well as a literary scholar. "The Literary Space of Modern Poetry" begins to tighten the screw of Mazzoni's central observation—modern poetry is a reflection on (read: reflective of) the alienated self—and, with the deft use of like-minded scholarship, guides the text into its "Conclusions" gracefully.

Guido Mazzoni's *On Modern Poetry* is a valuable text because of the intellectualizing it conducts among its many artful and critical sources; it is, at its core, a rich literature review circling what Mazzoni goes to great lengths to illustrate is the slipperiness of its subject. Modern poetry becomes no clearer after the author's rigorous analysis, but as a continued step in the inscrutable analysis of poetry, *On Modern Poetry* offers a necessary and well-rehearsed step forward.

Anthony DeGenaro
Ohio Dominican University