

Italian Futurism and the Cult of the Machine

Eugene Ostashevsky



On October 15, 1908 Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, a wealthy Italian poet born in Egypt and educated in France, crashed his just-purchased Fiat convertible while trying to avoid an oncoming bicyclist. Here his car is getting fished out of a ditch. Flipping over, Marinetti maintained, inspired him to invent an arts-and-literature movement called “Futurism.” Actually, Marinetti invented only the label and a few slogans: the movement itself was still in need of development. But what a label it was!

We want to sing about the love of danger, about the use of energy and recklessness as a common, daily practice. Courage, boldness and rebellion will be the essential elements of our poetry.



These lines are taken from "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," published in several Italian papers and then, in a spectacular publicity coup on February 20, 1909, on the front page of the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* (pictured). *Le Figaro* was read all over the world. Whatever Marinetti lacked in poetic talent, he more than made up for in advertising genius! Here's one of the many announcements of the Manifesto that shocked its readers:

We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes... is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.

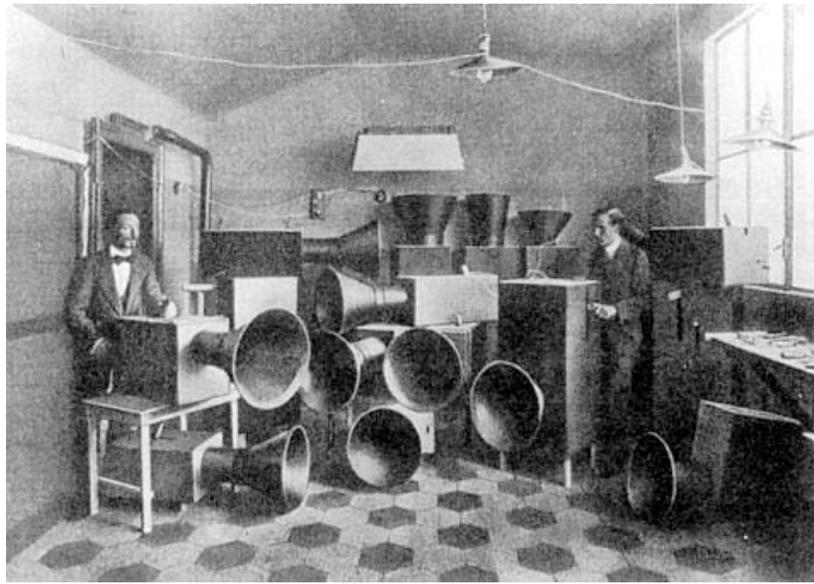


You might remember the *Victory of Samothrace* from Cultural Foundations II. A Hellenistic marble statue dating from about 190 BC, it depicts the goddess of victory, Nike, in flight. Today she flies in place in the Louvre, where Marinetti had the chance to contemplate her while a student in Paris.

“A racing car... is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*!” Consider Marinetti’s claim. What are the similarities between a car and the Nike statue upon which a contrast can be built? According to what criteria might a car be the more beautiful object? Now, look at it from another angle. How are industrialization and capitalism implicated in Marinetti’s choice? How is a car more like a copy of *Le Figaro*, in which the manifesto appeared, than like the *Victory of Samothrace*?



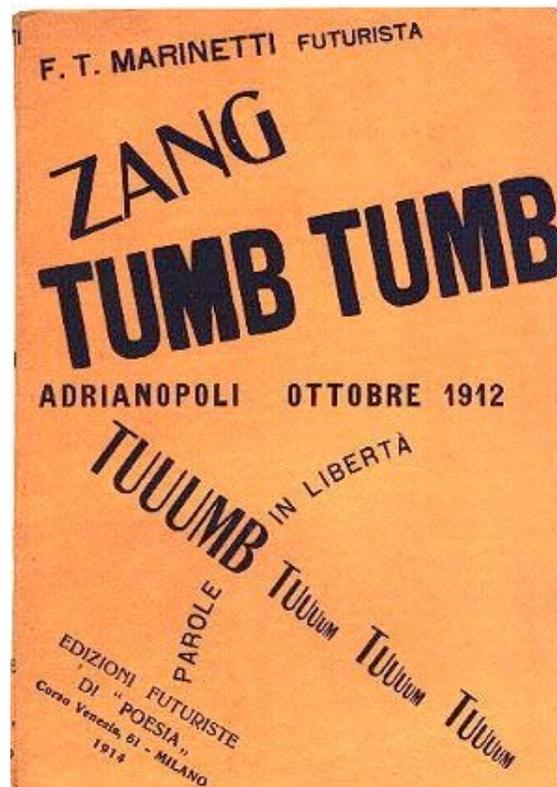
It is indicative of Marinetti's ultramodern genius for publicity that the Manifesto speaks for a tight group of "us, Futurists," although at the time of writing there was no such group—just several derivative poets who went out on the town together. The first major talents joined as the result of the hubbub raised by the Manifesto. Here is a work from 1913 or 1914 by the irrepressible Futurist painter Giacomo Balla, entitled "Development X Speed (Speed of an Automobile)." Absorbing the stylistic discoveries of Cubism, the Futurists applied them to the very non-Cubist theme of motion, time, and technology. They depicted objects in motion over stretches of time; they also "opened up" bodies, abolishing the distinction between figure and its environment. All these tendencies are visible in Balla's speeding automobile, shown in several exposures, as it were, and surrounded by so-called "lines of force."



The Futurists also composed music. Listen to this recording of a 1913 piece by Luigi Russolo, entitled “The City Awakens”

http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/sound/russolo_luigi/die_kunst/Russolo-Luigi_01_Risveglio.mp3.

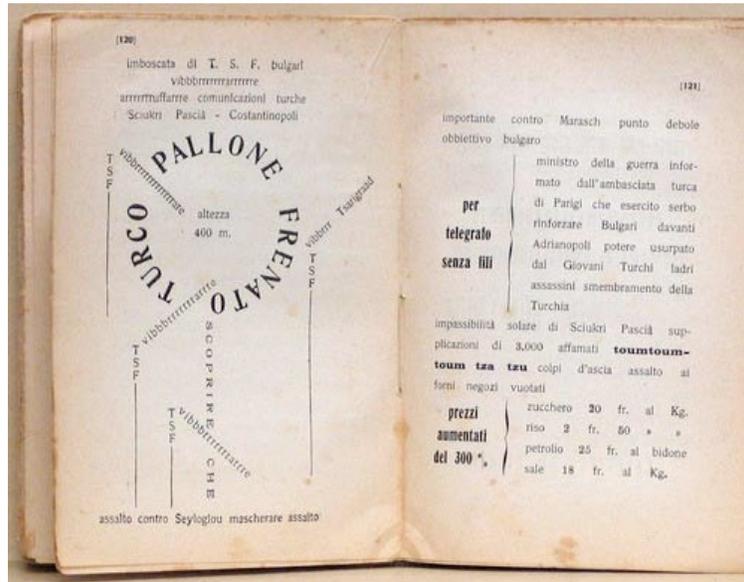
How is Russolo’s work *not* like classical music? How might it strike a listener in 1913, whose ear was formed by violin concertos? Russolo’s manifesto “The Art of Noises” opposes the “noise” that is the raw material of his music, with the “pure sound” that is the raw material of classical music. “In the roaring atmosphere of major cities,” maintains Russolo, “the machine... has created such a variety and rivalry of noises that pure sound... no longer arouses any feeling.” How would the experience of walking through a factory district in 1913 in Milan be different for a person who was familiar with the work of Russolo, as opposed to the person who was familiar only with the classical tradition? How does Russolo’s work carry out the Futurist objective of destroying the distinction between art and life? Here is the composer with *intonarumori*, the instruments he constructed for the performance of his work.



The life of today, insisted Marinetti, cannot be conveyed by the traditional syntax that combines words into phrases and sentences. (Syntax is what is responsible for the difference in meaning among “dog runs,” “dog run,” “run dog,” “dogs run,” etc.) Rather, since modernity makes us too excited to think about syntactical connections—this no doubt explains the grammar of your papers, my pretties!—the modern writer should place words side-by-side in their most noun-like grammatical form. As you can see from the title of Balla’s painting, mathematical operators were thrown in to clarify things. Marinetti was also big on onomatopoeia and typography. Here is a sample fragment in English from his 1914 book *Zang Tumb Tumb*:

train train **tron tron tron tron** (iron bridge: **tatatlontan**)
ssssiii ssiissii sssssssiii train train train fever of my
train express-express-express-expresssssss press-press-press-
press-press-press-press-press-presssssss press-press-press press-
presssssss stung by sea salt sssscennted by orange tress seek
sea sea sea boUnd BOUNd BOUBOUNd rails rrrails careeening
**(GREEDY SALTY PURPLE STRANGE INEVITABLE INCLINED IMPONDERABLE FRAGILE DANCING
MAGNETIC)** .

Why is “stung by sea salt”? Who is “greedy salty purple,” etc? Marinetti argued that modernity dissolves the self in sensations, and therefore literature should be written without the lyrical “I,” without any human protagonists at all.



In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the telegram was the technology for instant long-distance written communication, like our email or texting. If you informed someone of when your train arrives, or to wish a happy birthday, or if you were a reporter filing the latest story, you sent a telegram. Because it was pay-per-word, the language of telegrams was syncopated:

ARRIVING TUESDAY EXPRESS 8AM STOP BRING ORANGES STATION STOP

Thus the language of Futurist literature repeats the clipped language of the telegram. But there is more. Telegraphy had recently become transformed with the invention of the “wireless,” when telegrams started to fly not over cables (as in the nineteenth century), but over radio waves. The inventor of the “wireless” was Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian. Marinetti calls for poets to practice “wireless imagination” by skipping stages of analogy in their metaphors, just as Marconi’s invention dispenses with need for cable connection between sender and receiver.

If telegraphy inspired Marinetti’s style, what other, recently much improved technology made it physically possible? Please examine this spread of *Zang Tumb Tumb*. Also, click here <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Marinetti/Marinetti-Filippo_La-Battaglia-Di-

Adrianopoli_1924.mp3> to listen to Marinetti take advantage of yet another technology—that of audio recording.



It was the economic backwardness of his birth country that led Marconi, in 1897, to found the Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company in London. Fiat, on the other hand, founded in 1899 in Turin, was one of the first radically innovative concerns that aligned Italy with the promises of new industry. Thus, Futurist love for new technology also has a nationalist edge. “We establish Futurism,” contended the Manifesto, “because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archeologists, babysitters, and antiquarians.” In other words: We want to transform Italy from a country that lives by its past glories, to a powerful modern European state.

What would a country need to become a “powerful modern European state” in the early 1900s? It had to have factories like Fiat. It also, as you might have guessed from Marconi’s move to the capital of the British Empire, had to have colonies. In 1911, the Futurists cheered when Italy invaded the three North African provinces of the Ottoman Empire that now make up Libya. Italian bombardment of Tripoli from biplanes and dirigibles (pictured) was the first air bombardment in the history of the world, and thus a major technological innovation. Marinetti compares “superficial minds who are incapable of grasping the novel facts” of Futurism to “the Arabs who looked with indifference at the first airplanes in the skies of Tripoli.”



In the same way as Marinetti does not shy away from praise of bombing raids, he is not embarrassed to present Futurism in gendered terms. Good—active, aggressive, modern, enthusiastic—things are masculine. Bad—passive, slow, ancient, emotionally nuanced—things are feminine. The Manifesto of 1909 declares:

We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.

We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.

What are “beautiful ideas worth dying for” and “scorn for woman” even doing in the same sentence? What can their connection possibly be, as far as Marinetti is concerned? How about “feminism” and “libraries”? I am not asking rhetorical questions: I want you to think about what he might be thinking. Does he *intend* to be so comically over the top in his misogyny? In 1910 he denounces Venice, mired in the past and admired by tourists, as an old syphilitic prostitute, and demands a new, masculine Venice, bulging with smokestacks, a military center for dominating the Adriatic. In 1917 he becomes the proud author of a book entitled *How to Seduce Women*, which is such a success that he publishes an expanded edition, called *How to Seduce Women and Betray Men*.

Italian women got the right to vote only in 1945, thereby realizing the 1918 platform of Marinetti's Futurist Political Party, one of the few to advocate female suffrage.

Here is Marinetti in 1936, a venerable statesman of letters, with wife and three daughters, whose names translate as Wing, Victory, and Light.



You might have learned in your first semester of Social Foundations that in 17BC the Roman Emperor Augustus, while advocating the benefits of family values legislation to the Senate, cited the speech of the second-century-BC censor Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus to the effect that:

If we could survive without a wife, citizens of Rome, all of us would do without that nuisance; but since nature has so decreed that we cannot manage comfortably with them, nor live in any way without them, we must plan for our lasting preservation rather than for our temporary pleasure.

The process that Augustus and censor Metellus (conqueror of Macedonians, Arcadians, Achaeans, Celtiberians, and Lusitanians) wistfully resign themselves to doing without is called “male parthenogenesis.” Marinetti, who promised that future Italian glory would outshine that of ancient Rome by a factor of 100,000, thought it might be accomplished by a combination of willpower and machinery. In 1909 he penned a sci-fi novel called *Mafarka the Futurist*, whose plot features men “birthing” men without the meddling interference of women. Mafarka, an African Arab king engaged in conquest of black Africa, constructs himself a humano-mechanical son. Unaffected by the bummer of female birth, the filial cyborg is able to perform superhuman feats, like flying!



The idea of the humano-mechanical new man haunted Marinetti. In a manifesto on the coming evolution of the human race, “Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine” (1910), he exclaims:

We declare that in human flesh wings lie dormant.

The day when it will be possible for man to externalize his will so that, like a huge invisible arm, it can extend beyond him, then his Dream and Desire, which today are merely idle words, will rule supreme over conquered Space and Time.

This nonhuman, mechanical species, built for constant speed, will quite naturally be cruel, omniscient, and warlike...

Even now we can predict the development of the external protrusion of the sternum, resembling a prow, which will have great significance, given that man, in the future, will become an increasingly better aviator.

Consider this 1913 sculpture by Umberto Boccioni entitled *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, depicting, roughly, the motion of a human body in “specious present”: the now that includes the very immediate past and future. (Boccioni, the “fist of Futurism” who in 1910 had announced that a horse in motion has not four legs but twenty, volunteered in World War I, fell off his horse, and died.) Do you see any relationship between his sculpture and Marinetti’s new man?



I was going to avoid Marinetti's complex personal and ideological interaction with Italian Fascism, but I cannot bypass this delicious photograph of one "increasingly better aviator," taken in the not-so-distant future of 1933. It shows the Italian Fascist leader and Minister of Aviation Italo Balbo together with Sioux chief Blackhorn in Chicago. Balbo had flown to Chicago with a squadron of 24 seaplanes to be lionized at the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition. Chief Blackhorn, an exhibit of the same Exposition, made Balbo an honorary Sioux under the *nom de plume* "Chief Flying Eagle."

Marinetti covered Balbo's triumphant return to Rome for Italian radio. As for Chief Blackhorn, after the Exposition ended he decided he was too old to go back to his job with Circus Sarrasani in Dresden.



The manifestos repeatedly depict the birth of the new man that is the incarnation of Futurism from the body of the machine. As years go by, Marinetti emerges from increasingly larger vehicles, like a stripper whose eating disorder makes her jump out of with larger and larger cakes. In 1909 he made do with his overturned Fiat: “When I came up... from under the capsized car, I felt the iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart!” In the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” (1912), it was “in an airplane, sitting on a fuel tank, my belly warmed by the head of the pilot”—was the airplane having twins?—that “I realized the utter folly of the ancient syntax we inherited from Homer.” In 1914, in “Geometrical and Mechanical Splendor,” Marinetti swears that his “Futurist senses perceived this splendor for the first time on the bridge of a dreadnought.” A dreadnought! Do you know how big that is? Here is a picture of the first-ever dreadnought, the 1906 British ship *Dreadnought*. Rather banal name, don’t you think? The Italians, who launched their first dreadnought in 1910, showed far more flair by calling their ship the *Dante Alighieri*.

Dante Alighieri was the first dreadnought in the world to have as many guns in its turrets as there are lines in each stanza of the *Divine Comedy*.



Speaking of dreadnoughts. One February day in 1910, the HMS *Dreadnought*, anchored off the coast of England, received a delegation of Abyssinian (i.e., Ethiopian) princes. Or so it seemed. In fact, the perpetrators of the Dreadnought Hoax were young upper-class British pacifists in blackface, wearing fancy robes and accompanied by “translators.” They addressed the ship’s officers in a mixture of made-up words and Greek and Latin, with no officer thinking it proper to ask why Ethiopians should speak either of these languages. When the officers demonstrated some particularly excellent aspect of the dreadnought *Dreadnought*, the hoaxers shouted in unison “Bunga, bunga!”

Behold a picture of the Abyssinian “princes.” The figure on the far left is the future Virginia Woolf.

And “Bunga, bunga!” has recently been much on the lips of the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi.



Four and a half years later, Germany pulled off an even more spectacular dreadnought hoax. The Ottoman Empire was in the process of buying two dreadnoughts from a British manufacturer when World War I broke out. The ships had been paid for but not yet delivered. The British Navy therefore requisitioned them, although the Ottomans were still neutral. Germany immediately sent two battle cruisers to Constantinople, with the note that said something along the lines of:

Sorry about your loss. We hope this small token of our affection might make up for it somewhat.

With gratitude, the Sultan accepted the present. Flying the Ottoman flag and with their (still German) crews donning fezzes, the two cruisers proceeded right into the Black Sea and began shelling Russian positions in Crimea—still under the Ottoman flag, of course! This is how the Ottoman Empire was entered into World War I.

No one knows how many Ottoman subjects died as the indirect result of the Second Dreadnought Hoax. Estimates run up to 5,000,000, the overwhelming majority of them civilians, with 1,000,000 or 1,500,000 of them Armenians slaughtered by Turkish troops and Kurdish paramilitaries. This 1930s painting by the Armenian-American artist Arshile Gorky shows himself as a boy with his mother, who perished in the genocide. It is not Futurist at all.

<16.Kantemirovka.jpeg>

As for me, the picture of Marinetti that fascinates me the most is one of his last. Here he is, an ancient volunteer with the Italian divisions participating in the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The month is September 1942; the village is Kantemirovka, between the Don River and the Volga, and the Germans (and the Italians) are pushing towards Stalingrad. Marinetti poses—he *always* poses—with the old woman in whose house he was quartered, and her grandchildren. Look at him. What the hell can he be possibly thinking?

Acknowledgements

Quotations from Marinetti are taken from *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umberto Apollonio (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001), 19-24, 95-106, 154-60; from his *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 85-88, 107-19; and from his *Selected Poems and Related Prose* (Yale UP, 2002), 55-82. Quotation from Augustus or rather Metellus comes from Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 2nd edition, as excerpted online for the Stoa Consortium <<http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/wlgr/wlgr-romanlegal120.shtml>>.